PAAC

PARLIAMENT

REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

TWENTY- FIRST REPORT OF THE

THE COMMITTEE ON

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND APPROPRIATIONS

FIFTH SESSION OF THE 11TH PARLIAMENT

INQUIRY An Inquiry into the oversight of State Agencies under the purview of the Ministry of Education and funding to Private Secondary School Institutions

Public Administration and Appropriations Committee

The Public Administration and Appropriations Committee (PAAC) is established by Standing Order 102 and 92 of the House of Representatives and the Senate respectively. The Committee is mandated to consider and report to Parliament on:

(a) *the budgetary expenditure of Government agencies to ensure that expenditure is embarked upon in accordance with parliamentary approval;*

(b) *the budgetary expenditure of Government agencies as it occurs and keeps Parliament informed of how the budget allocation is being implemented; and*

(c) *the administration of Government agencies to determine hindrances to their efficiency and to make recommendations to the Government for improvement of public administration.*

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Mrs. Bridgid Mary Annisette-George	Chairman
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Mr. Daniel Dookie	Member
Mr. Wade Mark	Member
Brig. Gen. (Ret.) Ancil Antoine	Member
Ms. Amrita Deonarine	Member
Mr. Foster Cummings	Member

Committee Staff

The current staff members serving the Committee are:

Ms. Keiba Jacob	Secretary to the Committee
Ms. Sheranne Samuel	Assistant Secretary
Ms. Hema Bhagaloo	Assistant Secretary
Ms. Rachel Nunes	Graduate Research Assistant
Ms. Ashaki Alexis	Graduate Research Assistant
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Publication

An electronic copy of this report can be found on the Parliament website using the following link:
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Date Laid in HOR: Dec 06, 2019 **Date Laid in Senate: Dec 07, 2019**

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Mr. Clarence Rambharat
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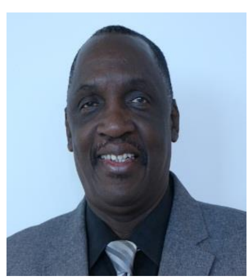

Brig. Gen. (Ret.) Ancil Antoine
Member

Mr. Foster Cummings
Member

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Report of the Public Administration and Appropriations Committee (PAAC) for the Eleventh Parliament contains the details of the an inquiry into the oversight of State Agencies under the purview of the Ministry of Education and funding to Private Secondary School Institutions.

The PAAC agreed to conduct an inquiry:

a. To determine how the Ministry of Education ensures accountability and transparency within the expenditure by State Enterprises;
b. To determine how the Ministry of Education ensures accountability and transparency within Government funding disbursed to private Secondary School institutions;
c. To determine how the Ministry provides meaningful oversight of State Enterprises and Private Secondary School Institutions; and
d. To examine the challenges of managing State Enterprises or funding to Private Secondary School Institutions.

The Committee employed two (2) mechanisms

i. review of written submissions; and
ii. a Public Hearing.

The Committee focused on a review and analysis of the written submissions submitted by the Ministry of Education. Subsequently, the Committee conducted a Public Hearing with officials of the Ministry of Education.

The Committee proposed recommendations related to the issues identified. Its Observations and Recommendations are presented in Chapter 3.

1. INTRODUCTION

THE COMMITTEE

The PAAC of the Eleventh Republican Parliament was established by the revised Standing Orders to:

- examine current public expenditure, thereby capturing the full budget cycle by providing Parliamentary oversight of the implementation of the budget; and
- conduct a real time examination of the expenditure of Ministries and Departments.

Change in Membership

1. In the 11th Parliament the Members of the Committee were appointed 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. By resolution of the Senate On November 3, 2017, Ms. Jennifer Raffoul was appointed as a Member of the Committee in lieu of Dr. Dhanayshar Mahabir.
3. By resolution of the House of Representatives on November 24, 2017, Brigadier General (Ret.) Ancil Antoine was appointed as a Member of the Committee in lieu of Mr. Maxie Cuffie.
4. By resolution of the Senate on November 28, 2017, Mr. Ronald Huggins was appointed as a Member of the Committee in lieu of Ms. Allyson Baksh.
5. By resolution of the Senate on November 27, 2018, Mr. Garvin Simonette was appointed as a Member of the Committee in lieu of Mr. Ronald Huggins.
6. By resolution of the Senate on November 27, 2018, Ms. Amrita Deonarine was appointed as a Member of the Committee in lieu of Ms. Jennifer Raffoul.
7. By resolution of the Senate on October 25, 2019, Mr. Foster Cummings was appointed as a Member of the Committee in lieu of Mr. Garvin Simonette.

Chairman and Vice-Chairman

By virtue of S.O. 109(6) and 99(6) of the House of Representatives and the Senate respectively, the Chairman of the Committee is the Speaker. At its First Meeting held on January 27 2016, Dr. Lackram Bodoe was elected the Vice-Chairman.

Quorum

In order to exercise the powers granted to it by the House, the Committee was required by the Standing Orders to establish a quorum. A quorum of three (3) Members, inclusive of the Chairman or Vice-Chairman, with representatives from both Houses, was agreed to by the Committee at its First Meeting.

2. METHODOLOGY

Determination of the Committee's Work Programme

At an *in camera* meeting of the Committee held on Tuesday September 28, 2018, it was agreed that the Committee would engage in an inquiry into the oversight of State Agencies under the purview of the Ministry of Education (MoE) and funding to Private Secondary School Institutions.

Review of Documents

The Committee deliberated on the following documents, namely:

i. Written Submissions from the Ministry of Education;
ii. Current news.

The Inquiry Process

The Inquiry Process outlines steps taken by the Committee when conducting an inquiry into an entity or issue. The following steps outline the Inquiry process followed by the PAAC during its inquiry into the oversight of State Agencies under the purview of the Ministry of Education and funding to Private Secondary School Institutions:

i. Identification of entity to be examined – State Agencies under the purview of the MoE and Private Secondary School Institutions;
ii. Preparation of Inquiry Proposal on the oversight of State Agencies under the purview of the Ministry of Education and funding to Private Secondary School Institutions. The Inquiry Proposal outlined:
    - Background;
    - Objectives of Inquiry; and
    - Proposed Questions.
iii. Inquiry Proposal with questions were forwarded to the MoE on **February 20, 2019** for written responses. Responses were received from the MoE on **March 12, 2019**.
iv. Preparation of an Issues Paper by the Secretariat for the Committee's consideration, based on written responses received from the MoE. The Issues Paper identified and summarises any matters of concern in the responses provided by the MoE.

v. Based on the responses received and the issues identified, the Committee agreed to have a Public Hearing. The relevant witnesses were invited to attend and provide evidence on **Wednesday March 13, 2019.**

vi. Following the Public Hearing, a request for further details was sent to the following stakeholders on **Tuesday March 19, 2019**:

- Ministry of Education – response received on April 15, 2019; and
- Service Commissions Department – response received on April 11, 2019.

3. ISSUES, OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Oversight by the Ministry

The Ministry of Education is responsible for the following agencies:

- The National Training Agency (NTA)
- National Schools Dietary Service Limited (NSDSL)
- Metal Industries Company Institute of Technology (MIC)
- The National Energy Skills Center (NESC)
- The University of the West Indies (UWI)
- The College of Science, Technology and Applied Arts of Trinidad and Tobago (COSTAATT)
- The Accreditation Council of Trinidad and Tobago (ACTT)
- University of Trinidad and Tobago (UTT)
- Education Facilities Company Limited (EFCL)
- Youth Training and Employment Partnership Programme Limited (YTEPP).
- The National Institute of Higher Education, Research, Science and Technology (NIHERST)

In 2015 the Ministry of Education was merged with the Ministry of Tertiary Education and Skills Training. This realignment increased the number of Statutory Authorities and Bodies. Given the increased number of agencies under the Ministry's purview, the Committee questioned the level of the Ministry's oversight. The Ministry explained that it was not originally structured to manage this number of agencies and was attempting to put mechanisms in place to ensure agencies were given the type of oversight required. The Ministry stated that, given the circumstances, it had tightened up significantly on the process for monitoring and agencies were required to report on a regular basis. Officials stated that the major challenge was a lack of staff to ensure effective monitoring. At the time of the hearing, the Ministry was splitting the monitoring function among established Divisions. Divisions were assigned to monitor agencies involved in the function that the Division already performs, for example the Ministry's Audit Division will monitor the audit aspect of an agency or the Ministry's Human Resource Unit will oversee the human resource function of an agency.

Recommendation:

- ***The Ministry of Education should seek to acquire the necessary staff to effectively monitor the agencies under its purview. A status update on the recruitment of staff should be submitted to the Parliament by February 28, 2020.***

2. Monitoring and Evaluation

During the questioning of the late or outstanding submissions of financial statements, the Committee sought an update on the Ministry's Monitoring and Evaluation Unit. The Ministry explained that the Unit is charged with the responsibility of reviewing reports submitted by all agencies under its purview. Officials indicated that though there exists a Monitoring and Evaluation Unit, it was not staffed. Additionally, the Committee was informed that the Ministry was in the process of developing a Monitoring and Reporting Framework which outlines the deadlines for the submission of reports, the process by which documents are reviewed as well as how feedback is communicated and action taken against non-compliant agencies.

Recommendations:

- ***The Ministry of Education should provide an update on the recruitment of the requisite staff to fill the Monitoring and Evaluation Unit. This should be completed by February 28, 2020.***
- ***The Ministry of Education should submit a copy of the completed Monitoring and Reporting Framework to the Parliament by February 28, 2020.***

3. Rationalisation of Agencies

Officials were questioned as to whether they considered conducting an exercise to rationalise the agencies under the Ministry's purview. The Committee spoke to the existence of the NTA and YTEPP - both training agencies - and expressed concern over the overlapping of services provided. Officials stated that they were in the process of conducting an exercise to rationalise agencies but were unable to provide further information because they were still in the early stages of the exercise. Officials also stated that the exercise would focus on the elimination of waste and duplication.

Recommendations:

- ***The Ministry of Education should provide a status report on the exercise to rationalise agencies by February 28, 2020.***

4. Outstanding Financial Statements

Sections III 3.1 of the State Enterprises Performance Monitoring Manual states:

4.1.17 PUBLISHING OF FINANCIAL STATEMENTS

"Policy State Enterprises are required to publish in at least one (1) major daily newspaper a summary of its audited financial statements within four (4) months following the completion of the financial year and a summary of the un-audited half-yearly statements within two (2) months of the mid-year date subject to the approval of the Minister of Finance. These summary statements should contain the disclosures required by the Securities Industry Act, 1995"

In a written response received from the Ministry, the following was indicated:

Status of Audited Financial Statements
As at March 2019

No.	External Agencies	Outstanding Periods	Status
1.	EFCL	2015/2016 to 2017/2018	A letter dated March 28, 2019 stated that the estimated timeframe for submission of the 2015 financial statements would be August 2019. As at November 1, 2019 the statements were not received.
2.	NSDSL	Up to date	Statements received
3.	MIC-IT	2016/2017 to 2017/2018	The outstanding statements to be audited were due to commence in April 2019.
4.	NTA	2012/2013 to 2017/2018	A letter dated April 10, 2019 the agency indicated the following: 2012-2014 – to be completed by June 30, 2019; 2015-2016 to be completed by December 31, 2019; and

			2017-2018 to be completed by June 30, 2019.
5.	YTEPP	2017/2018	The outstanding statement was being finalised for audit.
6.	NESC	2016/2017 to 2017/2018	Outstanding audits were completed, and were expected to be submitted shortly.
7.	NIHERST	2012/2013 to 2017/2018	Auditor General's Department is the External Auditor. Due to a manpower shortage at the Auditor General's Department, there was a backlog at the Department which has impacted the review of this report.

The Committee sought explanations from the Ministry on the non-submission of financial statements from EFCL. Officials stated that they were experiencing some challenges with EFCL and were working with the company to resolve those issues. The Committee questioned the timeliness of reporting by agencies under the Ministry's purview. Officials stated that most budget documents were submitted on time but that there were usually some time lags in the submission of the Administrative Reports and the Audited Financial Statements. Requests would then be made to the agencies in writing and followed up by telephone and electronic communication to remind the agencies of their obligations. The Research Planning and Technical Services Division provides oversight for all Divisions of the Ministry and reviews all documents submitted by agencies under its purview.

The Committee requested details from the Ministry on the review process for documents submitted by agencies under its purview. The Ministry explained that while they were without a dedicated Compliance Unit, they had been successful in having a "round robin" type review process with the Audit Department, Human Resources, Accounts and if necessary by the Information Technology Unit. At the time of the public hearing, officials stated that the type of document submitted would determine the Department to which the document was referred for review. For example audited financial statements, were routed directly to the Finance and Accounts Divisions; Annual reports or any project documents, were forwarded to the Planning Unit.

The Ministry further indicated that a comprehensive Monitoring and Reporting Framework was being developed to increase compliance and to strengthen the process of Reporting. The

Ministry hoped to eventually create a much more robust system to include a Compliance Unit. The Ministry expressed the view that having less agencies under its purview would allow for a more effective committee-type review process.

Recommendations:

- ***The Ministry of Education should submit a status update on the outstanding financial statements as well as administrative reports from all entities listed in the table above as at October 31, 2019 by January 30, 2020.***
- ***The Ministry of Education should develop an effective review process that ensures accountability and transparency. The approved process should be completed by January 30, 2020.***

5. Project Management

In written responses received from the Ministry of Education, the Committee learnt that construction of schools was conducted by the EFCL on behalf of the Ministry of Education. Engineers in the Ministry's Project Management Unit known as Education Facilities Planning and Procurement Division (EFPPD) frequently conducted site visits to projects undertaken by the EFCL. The Ministry is guided by the Exchequer and Audit Act, Chapter 60:01 (Financial Regulations and Instructions), as well as the Ministry of Finance and the Comptroller of Accounts directives to ensure accountability and transparency in the execution of projects.

In some Tertiary Level Institutions there exists established Project Management Units. These are:

- MIC-IT
- YTEPP
- NESC

Due to the small number of projects being implemented by the NIHERST, the institution assigns persons to implement and manage the projects from within other established units. At the time of the public hearing, the NTA was not implementing any PSIP Projects and therefore had no project unit.

Recommendations:

- ***The Ministry should develop a mandatory process with regard to project management, to be adhered to by all agencies under its purview. A copy should be submitted to the Parliament by January 30, 2020.***

6. Reporting

In a written response received, the Ministry explained that there is a Project and Programmes Management Unit (PPMU) which prepares a payment schedule for each month. The Permanent Secretary then approves the Payment schedule before funds are released. The PPMU also prepares a comprehensive Achievement Report on a monthly basis using Appendix XIX of the Call Circular which highlights the expenditure under each Sub-Head.

Each agency is required to submit all monthly Supporting Documents as follows:

- Invoices – certified Correct & Paid;
- Letters of Award;
- Signed Contracts with Appendices;
- Quotations/Proposals;
- Scope of Works if not detailed in the Contract;
- Supporting Documents for variations from signed contract etc.

Observation:

- ***The Committee notes the reporting process undertaken by the Ministry.***

Recommendations

- ***The Ministry should submit the payment schedule for the last three (3) months of fiscal 2019 by January 30, 2020.***

7. Follow-up on Nepotism at the Youth Training and Employment Partnership Programme

In June and July 2018, when YTEPP appeared before the Public Accounts (Enterprises) Committee, nepotism was discovered within the agency involving the Chief Executive Officer. The Committee asked the Ministry for an update on this issue. The Ministry was questioned on its oversight role over the state agency. The Ministry explained that because the situation was quickly dealt with internally, they did not request a report. The Ministry further stated that due to this occurrence, it was, at the time of the hearing, brainstorming mechanisms to prevent this type of situation form recurring.

Recommendations:

- ***The Ministry of Education should provide to the Parliament, a report on the occurrence of nepotism at YTEPP and identify the causes for this occurrence. This report should be submitted to Parliament by January 30, 2020; and***
- ***The Ministry of Education should provide an update on the mechanism(s) if any, which it has developed to reduce the risk of such impropriety. A detailed description of these mechanisms should be submitted to Parliament by January 30, 2020.***

4. CONCLUSION

During the course of the examination which consisted of written submissions and a Public Hearing, the Committee followed up on a number of issues from the responses received from the Ministry of Education. Issues arising from the oversight by the Ministry, outstanding financial statements, reporting, project management and the rationalisation of state agencies were discussed.

Throughout its deliberations, the Committee discovered that there were a number of staff shortages and ineffective oversight of state agencies under the Ministry's purview. The Ministry's biggest challenge was outstanding financial statements from its agencies and the Ministry's inability to ensure all statements and reports were submitted on time. Additionally, the Committee is of the view that the lack of a Monitoring and Evaluation Unit led to a lack of guiding policies and strategies which negatively impacted the Ministry's oversight role. However, it appears that there is a functioning and adequate report mechanism. The Committee considers that greater oversight should be given by the Ministry of Education over the State Agencies under its purview. The Committee proposes that consideration can be given to delegating oversight roles to other Departments within the Ministry to enhance efficiencies.

The Committee is of the view that the adoption of its proposed recommendations will lead to greater accountability, transparency and value for money in the use of public funds. Moreover, the Committee intends to monitor the progress made in the implementation of the recommendations proposed in this Report.

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

Sgd.
Mrs. Bridgid Mary Annisette-George
Chairman

Sgd.
Dr. Lackram Bodoe
Vice-Chairman

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APPENDIX I

Questions to Entities

An Inquiry into the oversight of State Agencies under the purview of the Ministry of Education and funding to Private Secondary School Institutions

General Questions:

1. What is the MOE's primary responsibility in the oversight of the state agencies under its purview?
2. What mechanisms have been implemented by MOE to determine whether policy is carried out efficiently, effectively and economically by these state agencies?
3. How does the PS ensure accountability and value for money, transparency at these agencies?
4. Are the agencies reporting on its objectives and performance on a timely, accurate and reliable basis? If no, what is being done to rectify this?

Issue: Audited Financial Statements

Based on the State Enterprises Performance Monitoring Manual, page 30, State Enterprises are required to submit Audited Financial Statements to the Minister of Finance within four (4) months of their financial year end. These reports are to be laid in Parliament and subsequently submitted to the Public Accounts and Enterprises Committee for consideration.[1] It was observed that the audited financial statements of the National Training Agency for the period 2012 - 2017 were not yet submitted and is therefore deemed unacceptable.

Questions:

1. Are the financial statements of the agencies under the purview of the Ministry up to date?
2. Are all financial statements submitted to the Ministry on time?
   i. If no, please state the delinquent agencies and the reasons for the untimely submission.
   ii. What actions are taken by the Ministry against delinquent agencies?
3. What systems are in place to ensure that the audited financial statements are submitted to the Ministry and Ministry of Finance –Investments Division within the stipulated deadline?

[1] The Ministry of Finance website, accessed on January 24, 2017, http://www.finance.gov.tt/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/State-Enterprise-Performance-Monitoring-Manual-2011.pdf

4. What robust controls were implemented by MOE to ensure proper management records and related controls of all state agencies?
5. Based on the Section 3.2 of the State Enterprises Performance Monitoring Manual, provide an update for the submission of the various reports from the following agencies:
    i. Education Facilities Company Limited (EFCL) - 2016-2018
    ii. Metal Industries Company Limited (MIC) - 2016-2018
    iii. National Training Agency (NTA) - 2012-2018
    iv. Youth Training & Employment Partnership Programme (YTEPP) – 2017-2018

Issue: Administrative Expenses

Questions:

1. Provide a breakdown of the Administrative Expenses for each agency under the purview of the MOE f07 2018 and 2019.
2. Have any internal control procedures been implemented to reduce the administrative costs of these agencies?
3. What systems are in place to ensure there is proper usage of funds by agencies?

Issue: Staff Expenses

Questions:

1. What is the role of the Ministry in hiring staff at the state agencies under its purview?
2. What role does the Ministry play in determining the salaries of staff at the agencies under its purview?
3. Provide a breakdown of the number of staff (permanent and contract) at each agency under the purview of the Ministry.
4. State the number of employees at each agency on short term contract?
5. How are gratuities paid to contract workers?
6. How often does staff at the agencies receive training?
7. Which training programs take priority?
8. Do the agencies have the human resource capacity to fulfill its mandate and objectives?
9. How does the Ministry treat with instances of Nepotism at state agencies?
10. Has there been instances of Nepotism at any state agency under its purview? If yes, provide further details.

Issue: Risk Management

Based on the State Enterprises Performance Monitoring Manual, page 118, Risk management contributes to the objective and improvement of performance in human health and safety, security, legal and regulatory compliance, public acceptance, environmental protection, product quality, project management, efficiency in operations, governance and reputation. It accounts for uncertainty, the nature of that uncertainty and how it can be addressed[2].

Questions:

1. What oversight mechanisms does the MOE have in place to monitor and evaluate the internal risk management controls of state agencies under its purview?
2. Do the agencies under the MOE's purview have a risk management policy? If yes, is it a standard policy used across all the operating departments? If no, what are the differences?
3. How often does MOE conduct analysis of the internal controls of these agencies?
4. Has MOE assessed whether identified risks are mitigated by existing internal controls and evaluated the design and effectiveness of those controls?
5. State the risk management process of each agency and how does this process seek to minimise potential adverse effects on the company's financial performance?

Issue: Internal Audit

As defined by the Institute of Internal Auditors (IIA), "Internal auditing is an independent, objective assurance and consulting activity designed to add value and improve an organization's operations. It helps an organization accomplish its objectives by bringing a systematic, disciplined approach to evaluate and improve the effectiveness of risk management, control, and governance processes. Internal Auditors' roles include monitoring, assessing, and analyzing organizational risk and controls; and reviewing and confirming information and compliance with policies, procedures, and laws.

Questions:

1. What is the MOE role in the Internal Audit Function of the agencies under its remit?
2. What actions does the Ministry take against the head of state agencies that fail to practice the mandatory internal audit controls?

[2] The Ministry of Finance website, accessed on December 19, 2018; http://www.finance.gov.tt/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/State-Enterprise-Performance-Monitoring-Manual-2011.pdf.

3. Provide the following information for the Internal Audit Unit at each agency:
    i. Is there an Internal Audit Unit at each agency?
    ii. How many persons are employed in the Unit?
    iii. How many audit positions are on the Establishment? Provide details.
    iv. Is the Unit adequately staffed? If no, what is being done to address this issue?
    v. How many persons in this unit are qualified to perform internal audits?
    vi. How effective has the internal audit function been in detecting inadequacies and financial impropriety?
    vii. What has been the framework for executing internal audits?
    viii. How frequently were audit investigations conducted? Provide a copy of the latest audit investigations/findings.
    ix. How has the internal audit activity contributed to improving value for money, governance, risk management and internal control processes of the EPOSDCL?
    x. What systems are in place to ensure the effectiveness of the functions of the auditors with respect to:
        a. Inspection of documents;
        b. Performing audit duties; and
        c. Observing assets.
    xi. What has been the Ministry's role in:
        a. Ensuring that accounting practices are carried out in accordance with Generally Accepted Accounting Principles?
        b. Monitoring, assessing and analysing organizational risk and control?
        c. Reviewing and confirming information and compliance with policies, procedures and laws.
    xii. At what point during the financial year is an internal audit performed on agencies?
    xiii. Are post audit reports submitted to the Ministry
    xiv. What impediments have Internal Auditors experienced?
    xv. What systems have been implemented to address issues identified by the Internal Auditor?
    xvi. How does the Ministry ensure recommendations proposed by internal auditors are implemented in a timely manner?

xvii. Has a Charter of Internal Audit work been prepared for fiscal year 2019?

xviii. Did the Internal Auditors provide any recommendations for the improvement of internal controls? Provide a copy of the findings and recommendations.

xix. Are internal audit reports submitted to the line Ministry or the Ministry of Finance –Investments Division for review?

Issue: Procurement Policy

According to the State Enterprises Performance Monitoring Manual, procurement means all functions that pertain to the obtaining of any goods, services or construction, including description of requirements, selection and solicitation of sources, preparation and award of contract, and all phases of contract administration. To tender or to bid refers to an offer made by a bidder(s) to supply required Materials or conduct specified Works and /or Services in responses to a request by a Company.

Questions:

1. Does each agency have a procurement policy?
2. What is the process used for the procurement of goods or services at the agencies?

xi. Based on the procurement policy, was a framework implemented to ensure best value for money in the acquisition of goods and services, accountability and transparency?

xii. When was the last review of the procurement policy conducted?

xiii. What systems have been implemented to monitor and review contracts?

xiv. What measures are being implemented by the EPOSDCL in preparation for the proclamation of the procurement legislation?

xv. What measures have been implemented to sensitise the Procurement Unit to the new procurement legislation?

Issue: Project management

Project management is an important component that drives organisational success. The delivery of business outcomes is realised through the success of projects. With reference to EPOSDCL projects;

Questions:

1. What is the role of the Ministry in the monitoring of projects undertaken by agencies under its purview?
2. How does the Ministry ensure transparency with the expenditure for projects?
3. How often does the MOE receive updates with regard to projects undertaken by state agencies?
4. Is there a Project Management Unit at each agency?
5. What challenges if any, have been experienced by the agencies with respect to managing projects? State how these challenges were rectified?
6. What oversight mechanisms were used by the MOE to monitor and manage projects at agencies?
7. State all major projects under each agency for the period 2015-2018? Provide the following details on each project:
    a. the name of the projects;
    b. the initial estimated cost;
    c. the actual cost of the projects;
    d. percentage of the project/projects completed;
    e. completion date and cost of the project/projects; and
    f. Challenges (if any).

Issue: Fraud Policy

A policy document on fraud is important since it assists staff in linking the company's vision to its day-to-day operations. A document on Fraud would allow management to guide operations without the need for constant physical intervention.

Questions:

1. Is there an Internal Fraud Policy at each agency? Provide a copy to the Committee?
2. Has there been any instance of fraud at any state agency under the remit of the Ministry?
    i. If yes, how did the Ministry deal with such instance?
    ii. What is the role of the Ministry in stances where fraudulent activities are discovered at an agency?

3. How are fraudulent activities detected, investigated and prevented at each agency?
4. What robust policies and controls have been implemented to monitor events that occur within and outside the ethics or compliance systems by the MOE?
5. Is there a documented process for recording, tracking and responding to all allegations or suspicions of fraud at agencies?

<u>Issue: Whistle-Blowing Policy</u>

Whistle-Blowing Policy provides standard guidelines within which organizations respond to the ethical or moral concerns of their employees. Whistleblowing policies should have the following components as a minimum:[3]

a. A clear statement that employees who are aware of possible wrongdoing within the organization have a responsibility to disclose that information to appropriate parties inside the organization; and
b. The designation of specific individuals or groups outside the chain of command as complaint recipients.

Questions:

1. Is there a Whistle-Blowing Policy at these agencies?
2. Are persons at agencies encouraged to report misconduct to the MOE?
3. Has there been any instances of Whistleblowing in any state agency? If yes provide details.
4. How does the MOE treat with instance of Whistleblowing at stat agencies?
5. What steps have been implemented by MOE to handle whistleblowing effectively at agencies?
6. What steps have been implemented by the Ministry to educate employees of the process in communicating their ethical concerns internally?

Government funding for Private Secondary School Institutions

<u>Accountability and Transparency</u>

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[3]Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago website, accessed on February 15, 2019 . http://ethics.csc.ncsu.edu/old/12_00/basics/whistle/rst/wstlblo_policy.html

Questions:

1. In relation to allocations to Private Secondary School Institutions, how does the Accounting Officer ensure there is an appropriate framework in place to provide him/her with the required accountability to Parliament?
2. What is the process used by the Accounting Officer to measure outcomes, evaluate performance and demonstrate value for money?
3. How does the Accounting Officer determine whether the framework for accountability, transparency and value for money at the Ministry is working with regard to monitoring Private Secondary School Institutions that are in receipt of Government funding?
4. Are there systems in place to determine whether this framework is reliable and efficient?
5. What is process for dealing with failure or underperformance in Private Secondary School Institutions that are in receipt of Government funding?
6. How does the AO provide meaningful oversight of Private Secondary School Institutions that are in receipt of Government funding?
7. Is there a framework for conflict of interest? If yes, please identify.
8. What measures are used to prevent conflicts of interest?
9. Given the current economic climate, has any consideration been given to the employment of measures to eliminate waste and unnecessary expenditure and to increase revenue collection?

Issues Arising from Recurrent Expenditure Allocation

Sub-Head: Current Transfers and Subsidies

006 Educational Institutions

Sub-Item: 20 Fees for Students at Private Secondary Schools

1. In light of the significant increase in allocation under this sub-item by $24,359,400 for fiscal year 2019. What changes can be anticipated in fiscal year 2019 under this sub-item?
2. Provide the names of the Private Secondary Schools that receive Government funding under this sub-item?
3. What is the number of students paid for under this sub-item?

4. What criteria must be met by Private Secondary Schools to receive Government funding for students?
5. Provide a breakdown of the fees paid per school for fiscal year 2018?
6. Are there policies regarding this sub-item? If yes, provide details.
7. What are the limits to this sub-item? Please provide details.
8. How does the PS oversee the dissemination of funds for this sub-item?
9. Are there any measures in place to guarantee accountability and transparency with regards to this sub-item?
10. What measures have been put in place to ensure that the PS carries out regular reviews and checks with which to assess and manage these funds?
11. Are checks and balances carried out by the PS? Provide details.
12. What oversight mechanisms are in place to ensure that there is value for money, accountability and transparency as regards to this sub-item?
13. What challenges and good practices exist, related to the financing of this sub-item?
14. What is the role of the Internal Auditor in monitoring expenditure for this sub-item?
15. How often are internal audit reports for items considered under this sub-item produced to ensure that there is some evidence of transparency and accountability? Provide a copy of report.
16. Have any strategies been implemented to assess the Ministry's expenditure and the potential to reduce the cost related to this expenditure?
17. What is the Ministry's role in preventing, detecting and investigating fraud as it relates to this Sub-Item?

APPENDIX II

The Inquiry Process

The Inquiry Process

The Inquiry Process outlines steps to be taken by the Committee when conducting an inquiry into an entity or issue. The following steps outlines the Inquiry process followed by the PAAC:

i. Identification of entity to be examined;
ii. Preparation of Inquiry Proposal for the selected entity. The Inquiry Proposal outlines:
    - Description
    - Background;
    - Overview of Expenditure
    - Rationale/Objective of Inquiry; and
    - Proposed Questions.
iii. Consideration and approval of Inquiry Proposals by the Committee and when approved, questions are forwarded to the entity 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;
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 summarises any matters of concern in the responses provided by the entity 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. There is usually no need to examine the entity in public if:
ix. the Committee believes the issues have little public interest; or
x. the Committee believes that the written responses provided are sufficient and no further explanation is necessary.
xii. Issue of written request to the entity for further details should the Committee require any additional information after the public hearing.
xiii. Report Committee's findings and recommendations to Parliament upon conclusion of the inquiry.
xiv. Follow-up on the implementation of the findings and recommendations of the report.

APPENDIX III

Minutes of Meetings

THE PUBLIC ADMINSTRATION AND APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE – FOURTH SESSION, ELEVENTH PARLIAMENT
MINUTES OF THE FORTY-FOURTH MEETING HELD ON WEDNESDAY MARCH 13, 2019 AT 1:34 P.M.
IN THE ARNOLD THOMASOS (EAST) MEETING ROOM, LEVEL 6 AND THE J. HAMILTON MAURICE ROOM, MEZZANINE FLOOR, TOWER D, OFFICE OF THE PARLIAMENT,
INTERNATIONAL WATERFRONT CENTRE,
1A WRIGHTSON ROAD, PORT OF SPAIN.

Present were:

Dr. Lackram Bodoe	-	Vice-Chairman
Mr. Wade Mark	-	Member
Mr. Garvin Simonette	-	Member
Ms. Amrita Deonarine	-	Member
Brig. Gen. (Ret.) Ancil Antoine	-	Member
Ms. Keiba Jacob	-	Secretary
Ms. Sheranne Samuel	-	Assistant Secretary
Ms. Rachel Nunes	-	Graduate Research Assistant
Ms. Ashaki Alexis	-	Graduate Research Assistant
Ms. Vanna Jankiepersad	-	Procedural Officer Intern

Absent were:

Mrs. Bridgid Mary Annisette-George	-	Chairman (Excused)
Ms. Nicole Olivierre	-	Member (Excused)
Mrs. Ayanna Webster-Roy	-	Member (Excused)
Mr. Clarence Rambharat	-	Member (Excused)
Mr. Daniel Dookie	-	Member (Excused)

COMMENCEMENT

1.1 At 1:34 p.m. the Vice-Chairman called the meeting to order.

1.2 The Vice-Chairman indicated that Mrs. Brigid Annisette-George, Ms. Nicole Olivierre, Mrs. Ayanna Webster-Roy, Mr. Clarence Rambharat and Mr. Daniel Dookie asked to be excused from the meeting.

EXAMINATION OF MINUTES OF THE FORTY-THIRD MEETING HELD ON FEBRUARY 20, 2019

2.1 The Committee examined the Minutes of the Forty-Third (43rd) Meeting held on Wednesday February 20, 2019.

2.2 There being no omissions or corrections, the Minutes, were confirmed on a motion moved by Mr. Wade Mark and seconded by Ms. Amrita Deonarine.

MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES OF THE FORTY-THIRD MEETING

3.1 As per item 3.3, the Vice-Chairman informed Members that the responses from the Environmental Management Authority, the Tobago House of Assembly and the Ministry of Public Administration were received on circulated to Members. The Vice-Chairman further informed Members that responses remained outstanding from the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development and the Town and Country Planning Division, Ministry of Planning and Development to which extensions were requested and granted to March 14, 2019 and March 18, 2019 respectively.

3.2 As per item 5.6, the Vice-Chairman indicated that the response from the Ministry of Public Utilities was received on February 22, 2019.

3.3. As per item 9.2 the Vice-Chairman advised Members that additional questions to stakeholders were dispatched with a deadline of March 15, 2019 for response.

3.4 As per item 10.1, the Vice-Chairman informed Members that the response from the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services was received on March 6, 2019.

3.5 As per item 10.2, the Vice-Chairman indicated that the response from the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries was received on February 21, 2019 and that the Ministry of Finance requested an extension to March 19, 2019.

3.6 As per item 10.3, the Vice-Chairman informed Members that the response from the Ministry of Health was received on March 6, 2019.

PRE-HEARING DISCUSSION: RE: AN INQUIRY INTO THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION'S OVERSIGHT OF STATE ENTERPRISES UNDER ITS PURVIEW AND GOVERNMENT FUNDING FOR PRIVATE SECONDARY SCHOOLS

4.1 The Vice-Chairman directed Members to the Issues Paper and the submission from the Ministry of Education.

4.2 The Vice-Chairman invited Members to raise any issues or questions on the inquiry into the Ministry of Education's oversight of state enterprises under its purview and Government funding for Private Secondary Schools.

4.3 A discussion ensued on the approach to the inquiry.

4.4 The Members raised an issue which arose during the 17th Sitting of the Senate on March 12, 2019 in which the Senate called on the Government to commit to the allocation of adequate funding to ensure that all children with special needs are provided with equal educational opportunities to other students.

4.5 The Members also raised the issue of the existence of institutions which treat with special needs children. A copy of the Expenditure Allocations for 2019 as well as the requisite Gazette was circulated to Members.

4.6 There being no further business for discussion in camera, the Vice-Chairman suspended the meeting at 2:30 p.m., to be reconvened in public.

AN INQUIRY INTO THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION'S OVERSIGHT OF STATE ENTERPRISES UNDER ITS PURVIEW AND GOVERNMENT FUNDING FOR PRIVATE SECONDARY SCHOOLS

5.1 The Vice-Chairman called the public meeting to order at 2:41 p.m., in the J. Hamilton Maurice Room, Mezzanine Floor.

5.2 The following officials joined the meeting:

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

Mr. Kurt Meyer	-	Permanent Secretary (Ag.)
Mr. Harrilal Seecharan	-	Chief Education Officer
Ms. Carol Bickram	-	Director (Ag.) Research, Planning and Technical Services
Mrs. Vidya Rambharose- Heeraman	-	Director, Finance and Accounts
Ms. Bhagwati Manick	-	Director, Finance and Accounts
Ms. Naima Hosein	-	Director, School Supervision
Ms. Anjanie Samaroo	-	Auditor III
Ms. Shinisse Edwards	-	Research Officer I

5.3 The Chairman welcomed the officials.

5.4 The Chairman outlined the mandate of the Committee and the purpose of the hearing. Introductions were then exchanged.

5.5 The following issues arose from the inquiry into the Ministry of Education's oversight of state enterprises under its purview and funding for Private Secondary Schools:

Ministry of Education

Oversight by the Ministry

1. The ongoing efforts made by the Ministry to rationalise agencies with respect to the existing number and overlap in roles and responsibilities of agencies;
2. The main challenges faced by the Ministry in carrying out its mandate while ensuring value for money;
3. Challenges faced by the Ministry owing to the negative impact of economic growth;
4. Lack of staff at the Ministry;
5. The review process for documents submitted to the Ministry;
6. Mechanisms which ensure that reports submitted to the Ministry are devoid of fraud;
7. Details surrounding the alleged termination of the wife of the former CEO of YTEPP;
8. The non-existence of a mechanism to prevent nepotism;
9. The consideration of measures to prevent nepotism;
10. The absence of mechanisms to ensure timely reporting by agencies based on the lack of clarity in the State Enterprises Performance Monitoring Manual;
11. Details on the Comprehensive Monitoring Framework geared toward increasing compliance;
12. Existing or non-existing measures that would assist agencies in becoming compliant;
13. The measures adopted by the Ministry to increase and strengthen compliance;
14. Challenges with partnering with the Education Facilities Company Limited (EFCL);
15. Overlapping of Vocational Institutes;
16. The lack of value for money at agencies;
17. The mechanisms established by the Ministry as it relates to proper feedback to agencies;
18. Issues with the range level of Internal Audit staff at the Ministry;
19. The implementation of proper mechanisms to ensure proper recording.

Monitoring and Evaluation

1. Details on real time monitoring and technology to assist with oversight;
2. The direct oversight mechanisms to monitor and prevent internal risk;
3. The lack of staff for the Monitoring and Evaluation Unit.

Outstanding Financial Statements

1. The status of the outstanding financial statements of EFCL;
2. Revision of the certification of the Caribbean Single Market and Economy (CSME);
3. The existence of a Whistleblowing Policy at the MOE.

Project Management

1. Details on the challenges faced with the partnering with EFCL;
2. The total number of construction projects undertaken by the Ministry which were left incomplete and the cost for completion;
3. The challenges faced with completing these construction projects;
4. The criteria that determine the prioritisation of projects;
5. Details on the site visits conducted by the Project Management Team;

6. The challenges faced with the securing of incomplete construction sites.

Oversight of Government funding to Private Secondary School Institutions

1. Challenges faced by the Ministry with Private Secondary School Institutions;
2. The number of Private Secondary Schools funded by the Ministry;
3. The number of students placed in Institutions on an annual basis based on the level of funding received and the challenges faced;
4. Details surrounding underperformance of students at Private Institutions;
5. Details on underperforming Private Institutions;
6. The method for measuring underperformance at Private Institutions;
7. Clarification on the mechanisms used to address students who drop out of Private Institutions;
8. The School Based Management Model;
9. Measures in place to monitor students and Private Institutions;
10. The qualifications of teachers at Private Institutions;
11. The process of registration for teachers at Private Institutions;
12. Details on the site visits conducted by the Ministry;
13. Challenges in locating students who have dropped out of both Private and Secondary Schools;
14. The percentage of students that drop out of school on an annual basis;
15. Clarification on the robust verification process to ensure accurate payments to Institutions;
16. Issues with errors and delays in payments by the Ministry;
17. Number of Secondary School spaces available in Public Schools;
18. Number of vacancies at the Student Support Services Division;
19. The role of the Student Support Services Division;
20. Implementation of new online initiatives on the Ministry of Education's website for direct communication with the Student Support Services Division
21. The optimisation of the Ministry's current staff complement;
22. The review and overlapping of functions at the Ministry;
23. The level of support given to Special Needs Institutions.

[Please see the verbatim notes for the detailed oral submission of the witnesses]

5.6 The Chairman thanked the officials for attending and they were excused.

<u>SUSPENSION</u>

6.1 At 4:46 p.m., the Vice-Chairman suspended the *public* meeting to resume *in camera* for a post-hearing discussion with Members only.

RESUMPTION

7.1 At 4:49 p.m. the Chairman resumed the meeting *in camera.*

POST-HEARING DISCUSSION

8.1 The Committee engaged in discussion on the just concluded public hearing.

8.2 The Committee agreed that additional questions would be sent to the stakeholders. [**Please see Appendix**].

OTHER BUSINESS

9.1 The Vice-Chairman informed Members that an invitation was extended to all Members to attend a training session on ***Gender responsive budgeting: A tool to support Trinidad and Tobago with implementing the 2030 Agenda*** which was scheduled for Tuesday March 26, 2019 from 9:30 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. and Wednesday March 27, 2019 from 1:30pm to 3:00 p.m. in the ANR Robinson (West) Meeting Room, Level 9, Office of the Parliament. Members were reminded to confirm their attendance to the Secretariat by Friday March 22, 2019.

9.2 The Vice-Chairman also reminded Members that the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service (TTPS) inquiry was re-scheduled to **Thursday March, 28 2019 at 1:30 p.m.** due to the unavailability of the entity.

ADJOURNMENT

10.1 The Vice-Chairman thanked Members for their attendance and indicated that the Committee's next meeting was for **Thursday March, 28 2019 at 1:30 p.m.** when the Committee will commence its inquiry into the expenditure and internal controls the TTPS for fiscal year 2019.

10.2 The adjournment was taken at 4:59 p.m.

We certify that these Minutes are true and correct.

VICE-CHAIRMAN

SECRETARY

March 13, 2019

APPENDIX IV

Additional Information Requested

Questions to the Ministry of Education

Provide in writing

1. A breakdown of the allocation utilised by the Ministry to date;
2. The annual allocation given to the Student Support Services Unit;
3. Clarification on the whistleblowing issue at NIHERST;
4. The breakdown of the allocation given to Private Special Schools;
5. A list of projects restarted and the timeframe for completion;
6. Details on the review process of documents submitted by agencies;
7. Details surrounding the current employment/termination of employment of a an immediate family member of the ex-CEO of the same YTEPP;
8. Provide a copy of the Nepotism Policy upon completion.

General Questions

1. MOE indicated that the Student Support Services Unit (SSSU) have been actively engaged in special needs education interventions in the primary and secondary schools, can the MOE provide the following:
    a. a list of the names of schools, the number of special needs children identified, intervention strategy, number of teacher aid's assigned;
    b. the number of teacher aids currently in demand and the number of teacher aids staffed in the SSSU at MOE;
    c. monitoring and oversight on the progress made by special needs child;
    d. what is the current number of students at the ECCE, Primary and Secondary schools that are visually impaired, mute, physically disabled.
2. Mr. Seecharan advised that the MOE have only recently begun initiatives at the ECCE Centre for special needs children, can MOE indicate:
    a. Why the Ministry chose to address special needs education at a later stage (primary school) rather than at an earlier stage (ECCE)?
    b. Can MOE submit to Parliament their strategy for the special needs education system at the ECCE level?
    c. What is the budgetary and resource requirements to efficiently fulfill the above strategy?

d. Is a curriculum being developed for special needs children? If yes, can the MOE provide to this committee a copy of such plans/reports etc.?

3. Is there an annual allocation to the MOE that is used to develop the SSSU? Can a list of specialist staff vacancies in this unit be provided to the parliament and the reasons?
4. Apart from COSTAAT and UTT Special Needs Certification Program, are there any plans to introduce Special Needs Degree Programs at UWI and other educational institutions?
5. Are there plans to upskill teachers' ability to detect, cope with and adequately educate special needs children?
6. What is the annual disbursements to applicants of the SSSU for the period 2012-2018?
7. Provide the number of applicants vs the number of persons who are in receipt of financial assistance from the SSSU.

Ministry's Oversight

1. What mechanisms has the MoE implemented to ensure that feedback on reports are given in a timely manner?
2. When will the monitoring framework aimed at increasing compliance and strengthening the process of following up with agencies be completed? Provide a date.

Audited Financial Statements

1. When was the last reminder to submit statements sent to delinquent agencies?
2. Has this method of reminding agencies been effective for oversight by the Ministry?
3. Has the Ministry considered new methods to ensure agencies uphold their deadlines for submission?
4. Describe the process developed to monitor compliance of agencies on reporting.

Internal Audit

1. Provide a recent example of an anomaly that required clarification by any Board/Management of the agencies under the Ministry's purview.
2. What actions are taken when irregularities are discovered in audit reports?

Procurement Policy

1. When will the Draft Internal Handbook be completed by the Education Facilities Company Limited (EFCL)?

2. When will the Ministry complete the review of the Procurement Policy submitted by MIC-Institute of Technology Limited?
3. When was the last consultation conducted with the Office of Procurement Regulation and the National Schools Dietary Services Limited?
4. Was feedback given by the MoE to NIHERST on the submitted Procurement Policy?

Procurement Management

1. At present, what is the total number of projects undertaken by the Ministry?
2. When was the last site visit conducted by EFPPD? Are site visit reports produced?
3. Are reports submitted on time considering the untimely submission of other reports?
4. Is greater attention given to EFCL as a result of the high number of projects undertaken? If no, why not?
5. What are the reasons for the lack of a Project Management Unit at EFCL and NSDSL?
6. How are projects undertaken by the agencies monitored?
7. Does the MoE have any mechanisms in place to ensure transparency and value for money with all projects undertaken by agencies?
8. Does the EFPPD have a role in the oversight of projects undertaken by all agencies under the Ministry?

Internal Audit Policy

1. How does the MOE ensure the effective monitoring of internal controls by management of the agencies for which they are responsible?
2. Are the findings from reports investigated, submitted to the MoE?
3. Is the MoE satisfied with the fraud prevention mechanisms of other agencies?
4. When will the Draft Fraud Policy of the NSDSL be finalised?

Government Funding Private Secondary School Institutions

Accountability and Transparency

1. How does the Ministry ensure that the Secondary Entrance Assessment (SEA) Placement Process is duly followed when placing students at private institutions?
2. What mechanisms are in place by the Ministry to ensure that claims for payments and updates on payment to private secondary institutions are received on a timely basis?
3. Have there been any instances where termly claims for payments and updates on payment to private secondary institutions were not received on time?

a) If yes, what was the rationale for the delay?
b) What was the outcome and actions taken by MoE?

4. Have there been instances where schools have failed to satisfy criteria and as such stopped receiving funding from the Ministry?

Process for addressing failure or underperformance in Private Secondary School Institutions that are in receipt of Government funding

1. Have there been any recent instances of underperformance of Private Institutions recorded by the Ministry as at March 1, 2019?
2. What actions are taken by the Ministry against Private Institutions that are consistently underperforming?
3. When was the last visit conducted by the District Leadership Team (DLT) in this regard?
4. What was the outcome of the visit?
5. Was a report generated by the District Leadership Team (DLT) and submitted to the Ministry?
6. When was the last monthly fraternity meeting and Termly District Conferences at the respective education districts held?
7. How does the Ministry treat with underperforming students?

Framework for conflict of interest

1. Has there been any instance of conflict of interest within the Ministry?
   a. If yes, please state the issue and the course of action taken by the Ministry.
2. Provide further details on the policy for conflict of interest.

Measures implemented by MoE to eliminate waste and unnecessary expenditure and to increase revenue collection

1. Describe in detail the more robust verification process that was implemented in September 2018 to ensure that accurate payments were made to the private institutions.

Issues Arising from the Recurrent Expenditure Allocation (pgs. 14-20 of submission)

Sub-Item: 20 Fees for Students at Private Secondary Schools

1. Why does the government only provide payment of fees for students placed in private schools for four (4) academic years as opposed to the full five (5) academic years?

2. What was the arrangement made for payment for the 5th academic year?
3. Are parents required to pay for the 5th academic year?
4. In what ways does the Ministry plan to collaborate with institutions going forward?
5. Have there been any recorded instances where a Private Secondary School enrolled a student and then sought approval?
6. If yes, what was the outcome of the situation?
7. What measures were implemented by the Ministry to ensure timely submissions of accurate paperwork from schools, and reduce the occurrence of errors in the submissions from the schools which delay the processing of payment?
8. How many Internal Auditors are assigned to monitoring expenditure for this sub-item?
9. Are there any vacant Internal Auditor positions assigned to monitoring expenditure for this sub-item?

    a. If yes, when was the request to fill vacancies made to the Service Commissions Department?
10. What training is provided to audit staff assigned to this sub-item?
11. Are there plans to conduct staff training for fiscal 2019?

a. If so, provide details.

12. What is the estimated completion date for the Internal Control and Risk Analysis Policy for preventing, detecting and investigating fraud?

Question to the Service Commissions Department

1. Provide an update on the request for additional Internal Audit staff by the Ministry of Education.

APPENDIX V

Verbatim Notes

VERBATIM NOTES OF THE FORTY-FOURTH PUBLIC MEETING OF THE PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE, HELD IN THE J. HAMILTON MAURICE ROOM, MEZZANINE FLOOR, (IN PUBLIC) OFFICE OF THE PARLIAMENT, TOWER D, THE PORT OF SPAIN INTERNATIONAL WATERFRONT CENTRE, #1A WRIGHTSON ROAD, PORT OF SPAIN, ON WEDNESDAY, MARCH 13, 2019, AT 2.40 P.M.

PRESENT

Dr. Lackram Bodoe	Vice-Chairman
Brig. Gen. Ancil Antoine	Member
Ms. Amrita Deonarine	Member
Mr. Garvin Simonette	Member
Mr. Wade Mark	Member
Ms. Keiba Jacob	Secretary
Ms. Sheranne Samuel	Assistant Secretary
Ms. Vanna Jankipersad	Procedural Officer Intern
Ms. Ashaki Alexis	Graduate Research Officer
Ms. Rachel Nunes	Graduate Research Officer

ABSENT

Mrs. Bridgid Annisette-George	Chairman
Mr. Clarence Rambharat	Member
Mrs. Ayanna Webster-Roy	Member
Mr. Daniel Dookie	Member
Ms. Nicole Olivierre	Member

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

Mr. Kurt Meyer	Permanent Secretary (Ag.)
Mr. Harrilal Seecharan	Chief Education Officer
Ms. Carol Bickram	Director (Ag.) Research, Planning and Technical Services
Mrs. Vidya Rambharose-Heeraman	Director, Finance and Accounts

Ms. Bhagwati Manick	Director, Finance and Accounts
Ms. Naima Hosein	Director, School Supervision
Ms. Anjanie Samaroo	Auditor III, Internal Audit
Ms. Shinisse Edwards	Research Officer I

Mr. Chairman: Good afternoon all. I want to say a very special welcome to the officials of the Ministry of Education and to thank you for being here with us this afternoon. Also, welcome to the members of the media and the public. I am Lackram Bodoe, the Vice-Chairman of the Public Administration and Appropriations Committee.

The Committee on Public Administration and Appropriations, the PAAC, has a mandate to consider and report to the House on the following matters: the budgetary expenditure of government agencies to ensure that expenditure is embarked upon in accordance with parliamentary approval; secondly, the budgetary expenditure of government agencies as it occurs and keeps Parliament informed of how the budget allocation is being implemented; and the administration of government agencies to determine hindrances to their efficiency and to make recommendations to the Government for improvement of public administration.

The purpose of this public meeting of the Public Administration and Appropriations Committee for the Eleventh Parliament is to seek further information on the Ministry of Education's oversight of state enterprises under its purview and Government funding for private secondary schools.

This Committee is desirous of hearing from the key officials of the Ministry of Education to discover the challenges being faced and to determine possible solutions to these challenges. The role of the Committee is to assist the Ministry in achieving effective oversight of state agencies and to ensure that expenditure is embarked upon in accordance with parliamentary approval.

This meeting is being held in public and is being broadcast live on the Parliament's Channel 11, Radio 105.5 FM and the Parliament's YouTube channel, *ParlView.* Viewers and listeners can send their comments related to today's enquiry via email to parl101@tt.parliament.org, facebook.com/ttparliament, and Twitter @ttparliament.

So if I can just, at this point, ask the representatives of the Ministry of Education to introduce yourselves.

[*Introductions made*]

Mr. Chairman: Welcome again and thank you for being here. I will just ask the members of this committee to introduce themselves, starting from my right.

[*Introductions made*]

Mr. Chairman: Thank you members. So, welcome again and if I can, at this point, invite the Permanent Secretary, Mr. Meyer to bring some opening statements.

Mr. Meyer: Good afternoon again. The Ministry of Education is charged with the responsibility for building human capital development for the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. We do this by ensuring access to quality education from the early childhood care to tertiary level. The Ministry has under its purview, 11 agencies. From the regulatory bodies would be the Accreditation Council of Trinidad and Tobago, the National Training Agency, COSTAATT, the University of the West Indies, UTT, the National Energy Skills Centre, MIC, YTEPP. In terms of the service providers, we have the Education Facilities Company Limited, the National School Dietaries Services Limited and finally we have NIHERST, the National Institute of Higher Education, Research, Science and Technology.

We monitor these agencies, guided by the State Enterprises Performance Manual, the Exchequer and Audit Act, the relevant Ministry of Finance Circulars, Integrity in Public Life Act and the accounting officer's letter, which details how this is supposed to be done.

In terms of these agencies, our role is to ensure that the agencies adhere to Government sectoral guidelines, and we do this in collaboration with the Ministry of Finance, to ensure that the policy issues are communicated to the agencies, that compliance is adhered to, that funding is available, strategic plans and budgets are reviewed, that there is consistency between government's macroeconomic policy and the plans of the agencies, and that any proposals for investments and joint ventures are reviewed.

We also ensure that directors are appointed in a timely manner and not all expenditure, both recurrent and on projects, are monitored as effectively as we possibly can. The Ministry is very pleased to be here to share our system of monitoring for both the state agencies and our oversight of the funding for private secondary schools. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much PS. Before we go into details of questions, I just wanted to ask broadly, and this might just be a moot question at this point in time, but I do believe that the opinions of senior public servants, those who are charged with the responsibility for implementing government policy and delivering services, I do believe that your opinion is sometimes important. And when I look at the purview of the state agencies that come under the Ministry of Education, the question I really want to ask, and again this is for the public benefit consumption, and even for administration, Ministers, and so on, the question really is this: Do you believe that these state agencies that you listed are best served and that they best serve stakeholders under the Ministry of Education's oversight?

Just to guide us where I am going with this, for example, if one looks at the NTA and YTEPP as training agencies, one could easily consider whether they should not be under a different Ministry, for example the Ministry of Labour and Small Enterprise Development, likewise the NDASF, which is the School Feeding Programme, perhaps under the Ministry of Health. So I am just asking a question as to what are your thoughts, what your opinion would be with regard to the entities under your watch.

Mr. Meyer: Okay, from the regulatory body point of view, which would be the NTA and the Accreditation Council of Trinidad and Tobago, the placement of those agencies, probably would not be any different under another Ministry, because they are regulatory bodies and they have their own way of doing business. So a Ministry would just basically be providing oversight to them.

The universities and colleges, well the Ministry of Education inherited that when there was a realignment of ministerial portfolios. Again, our oversight for those agencies would basically be making sure that their projects are managed in a timely manner, making sure they have the funding. Once again, logically they could be placed anywhere, but it is tertiary education and we are responsible for tertiary education, so logically it should be placed under us.

The Tech-Voc aspect of it, under the Education Act, we do have responsibility for Tech-Voc; so all the Tech-Voc agencies they are best placed here.

In terms of the other agencies like school dietary, given the fact that we have to make sure that our children are fed in a timely manner, it would be a little difficult for us to give that responsibility to another Ministry. I think it is best placed where we can keep an eye on it.

2.50 p.m.

Well EFCL right now, they are responsible for our construction programme, our new school construction programme. There was a time in the past, the very distant past, when that type of activity was done by the Ministry of Works and Transport, but I believe that that changed many, many, many, years ago.

Finally, we have NIHERST, and once again I think that was a recent transfer to the Ministry of Education. So in summary, I think generally, we are the best placed at this point in time given the structure of Government to manage the agencies under our purview. The real question would be, do we have too many? Maybe we can do some sort of rationalization and consolidation and that is something that we could say yes to.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you for that response, and I am sure that the latter question is something that we can explore as we go along. But, I just ask that question because with regard to, for example—and this I know may not come under you— but right now we have an issue with many qualified doctors who cannot find placements and so on, who cannot find jobs. And I was just drawing reference to in other countries—for example, in Cuba where the faculty of medicine comes under the Ministry of Education, just to cite the opposite, so that you could link up the training numbers with the job placements. But again, that is just food for thought, and I am just trying to explain to you why I would have thrown that out.

The second question I would want to ask you PS is that, if we look at the expenditure, the allocation. I am just looking at five of the major agencies that come under your watch, namely MIC; the School Feeding Programme, which is the National Schools Dietary Services Limited, that is the company that runs it; the NTA; YTEPP; the NESC; and NIHERST. If we looked at the actual expenditure for 2017 that would have amounted to $347,559,135 and your allocation for 2018 when you add the allocations for those agencies would be $310,401,100. So my question to you in light of this expenditure is that, what are the main challenges that you would be facing at the Ministry of Education in carrying out your mandate, which is to effectively oversee these entities and to ensure the citizens are getting value for money for this kind of expenditure? Just broadly, can you explain to us what your main challenge would be?

Mr. Meyer: Right now, with the rest of the country the economic climate is not of the best. So, I think that is our main challenge right now. We have many creditors, we have a lot of debt that has come over for the last couple of years and it is difficult to manage based on that. We have a number of projects that are—I do not want to say the word "stalled", but could be moving at a faster pace.

In terms of the oversight of the agencies, the Ministry was not strictly designed to manage this number of agencies. So we are struggling a bit to put things in place to make sure that the agencies are given the type of oversight they are required. We have done what I consider a very good job, because what we have done, we have tightened up significantly on how the monitoring has been done. The agencies are now reporting to us on a very regular basis, and I think we have been doing a good job as far as the monitoring. The difficulty is we do not have a large number of staff to do this, so the staff have to double up.

So we are managing the monitoring almost on a committee basis. We split the monitoring function among established divisions with functions already, like audit will the audit aspect of an agency. Our HR Unit will have to look at the HR aspect. So that really has been our challenge.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you, PS. So you did mention in response to my first question, and again that perhaps the number of agencies are too many. Is there any ongoing study or effort to look at maybe rationalizing some of these agencies?

Mr. Meyer: Yes, we are looking at that right now.

Mr. Chairman: Can you provide any details at all at this point?

Mr. Meyer: It is very early in that exercise. So we really are not in a position to say where we are going with it, but we are looking at all our agencies.

Mr. Chairman: PS, in your submission, you noted in addition to some of the challenges you mentioned just a while ago, some of the other issues would be that reports are in fact outstanding from a number of the agencies. I am looking at your ability now and the information you will have available to effectively monitor these agencies. So, the fact that reports are outstanding from a number of agencies, that there is a time lag in the submission of the administrative reports, that you have to remind agencies of their obligations—and you have mentioned that to strengthen this process the Ministry was developing a comprehensive monitoring framework to increase compliance—can you shed some light on what exactly is meant by that submission?

Mr. Meyer: As I said before, what we have done, we do not have a dedicated compliance unit. We are working towards creating that. So what we have done in the interim is put together people and created a compliance unit. We have a plan with every single agency listed and exactly what they are required to submit when, and we monitor them on a weekly basis to make sure that the documents are submitted.

There are instances when agencies have not submitted documents, and there are a number of reasons for that. Some of the time it is not entirely their fault. It could be, for example, in one agency the Auditor General is the auditor of record and they have manpower constraints, so the agency has been unable to submit. In other instances, the boards of the agencies may not have been appointed on a timely manner in the past, so they have difficulty signing off on the audited reports. And other instances the agencies themselves may not have been able to produce the documents in time.

But, I think generally there has been a trend towards compliance, and I think we just have a few outliers now. I think we almost have everybody up to date. There is one outstanding agency that had about four to five years of audited reports that were not up to date, and we were just informed today that we should get everything by January 2020.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you PS. In terms of the measures that might be available to you as the Permanent Secretary, and at the Ministry of Education, are there any measures that you currently have available, or you feel that you should have in terms of being able to increase and strengthen compliance?

Mr. Meyer: This may be wishful, but real-time access—

Mr. Chairman: That is why you are here.

Mr. Meyer:—real-time access to the expenditure of the agencies. Because if I am supposed to give you hundreds of millions of dollars, it would be nice if I am able in real time to see exactly how that money is being spent. The problem we have now is that a lot of our compliance is after the fact. And that is—it is difficult. Because you depend on your boards and your procurement committees, your audit committees to do the right thing, and by and large they do. But you still are in a difficult position if in case—we have had instances in the past when things may not have been done in the correct manner and those things end up in the newspapers, and it is not the best. So some more real-time monitoring using technology would be perhaps the ideal for us.

Mr. Chairman: Are there any steps currently in place within government agencies and Ministries, and so on, that is going in that direction that you speak about in terms of real-time monitoring or perhaps within the Ministry itself?

Mr. Meyer: It can be built, but I do not think we have the capability. It would have to be done with the Ministry of Finance. The Ministry of Finance will have to have a role in that.

Mr. Chairman: So that is not going to be available to you in the foreseeable or the near future?

Mr. Meyer: It could be done, but it is possible to build it out. Technically, it could be done. I do not know, I cannot say right now. We have never—I suppose we have been depending on the Ministry of Finance to do it for us. But if given the mandate, I suspect we could.

Mr. Chairman: Sure. Before I hand over to my colleagues to ask further questions. Can I ask you, PS, in terms of the allocation for 2018/2019, can you perhaps provide a ballpark figure in terms of how far you are along in terms of being able to utilize that expenditure?

Mr. Meyer: I would be very—that figure would be extremely rough, I would prefer to submit that after, it is probably less than 20 per cent.

Mr. Chairman: All right. And we are close to half of the financial year, so could you indicate what would be your challenges in terms of not being able to utilize more of the allocation?

Mr. Meyer: We have had some—well, from the construction side of it, we have had some severe challenges with a couple of our agencies in terms of there was literally no ability for them to engage contractors at one point in time. So we had to change our business model, and move to another state enterprise to provide us with construction and repair and maintenance services. And that I think, by and large, stymied us in our ability to spend our money there.

Mr. Chairman: Can you shed some light on that which you are speaking.

Mr. Meyer: That would be EFCL.

Mr. Chairman: Sorry.

Mr. Meyer: That would be EFCL.

Mr. Chairman: So you are saying that they have now been replaced?

Mr. Meyer: No, they are back in operation, but for the better part of last year they were unable to do what they had to do.

Mr. Chairman: Okay, well I am sure we will have some further questions on that later on. But, if I can invite member Mark at this point.

Mr. Mark: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Let me welcome the officials. I would like to ask the Chief Education Officer some questions, which I would like to clarify on behalf of the public and this Committee. And it has to do with the Government's funding for private secondary schools or school institutions. We know that the public school system is unable to place all successful, or those students who have successfully engaged in this SEA and you have to try to find a location or placements at private five-year institutions and even private Sixth Form institutions. Could you indicate to us what have been some of the challenges that the Ministry has been experiencing with these private institutions—that is, schools—in having our students who were successful, speedily placed in those institutions? What are some of the challenges we have experiencing as a Ministry of Education in that regard?

Mr. Seecharan: Prior to the current academic year we really did not have challenges in terms of accessing spaces. I think within the last academic year we had some challenges from the private schools as it relates to the funding that was being provided, which was not revised I think since 2005 or thereabouts. And therefore, I think the schools themselves were experiencing difficulty in terms of managing, and the education of the students in an effective manner because the resource being supplied—that is, the funding and what was required—was not lining up. So that within the last year we would have addressed that. I do not think we ever had an issue of not being able to access space.

If I could just go back a little bit, in 2000 when we started the process of engagement of private schools, that is when we moved to universal secondary education. And based on the Cabinet approval, at the time, there were a number of private schools that we brought on board and essentially those schools would have been maintained in terms of the list of schools that we require.

Since then I could recall, I think in 2006, there was one additional school that was added to the pool. So I do not think the issue is so much a shortage of space, as opposed to the process that we use where we only placed students in private schools based on the difference between spaces available in government and government-assisted. So that that difference is then made up between the private schools and Servol.

But in terms of challenges, I think the biggest issue had to do with the level of funding to these schools.

Mr. Mark: Could you also share with us, how many private schools are involved? You talked about an additional one coming on stream, could you outline the number of private schools, and the number of students that would be placed there on an annual basis?

Mr. Seecharan: Currently we have 12 private schools that are engaged in this exercise, three of them catering for A Level students. Sometime back when the decision was made at the level of the Ministry to expand Sixth Form places in schools, those schools were brought on board. So we have a total of 12; on an annual basis we place about 600 or a little bit—and that number varies from year to year depending on the student population. But on an annual basis we place about 600. In 2017/2018, we had 3,144 students who actually we have placed over a five-year period.

Mr. Mark: Are you saying the total number of students would have amounted to—

Mr. Seecharan: On the average it is, in the private secondary schools, it is about 600 students annually.

Mr. Mark: Annually. Now, could you also share with us any concerns or instances recorded by the Ministry as it concerns the underperformance of these institutions, given the fact that they are in receipt of government or taxpayer funding?

Mr. Seecharan: If we do—we normally do two things with the private schools. We monitor to ensure that both in terms of curriculum implementation and operation of the schools it is on par or in line with what our expectations are for the normal government and government-assisted schools, and that is done periodically during the school term. And we also look at when we have instances or reports made by parents or members of the public we visit. In terms of that comparison in student performance, when we look at the overall performance for schools in Trinidad and Tobago, and the performance of the private schools they are on par. So that, in fact, and sometimes we have to be careful in terms of the data and how we interpret it. But, in fact, the private schools, they only got an increase for this academic year, would have been producing more or less the same output as the other schools notwithstanding the funding issues. And I know, based on interaction with those institutions, that many of them would have had to actually seek alternative funding to keep the institution on par with us. So the increase this year, I hope, would kind of level off that issue.

Mr. Mark: Could you share with this Committee whether any of those—would you share with us, Mr. Seecharan, whether any of those private secondary schools were or would have been consistently underperforming that would have generated or triggered some concern in the Ministry? And if so, what action if any would have been taken by the Ministry to address this concern?

Mr. Seecharan: Okay. Again, I want to preface what I am saying in terms of the placement process. The current placement process starts off—it is really based on merit and student choices. So, therefore, students are placed in schools based on choices and their performance in the examination. And therefore, that leads to a certain degree of stratification; so certain schools, and I guess everybody knows which schools we are talking about, get the top-performing students. And then, for example in the government schools you still have that stratification taking place. So that the students who are entering schools actually do not all start at the same point, and therefore, we have to look at what we are interpreting as the outcomes based on what we put in.

Among the private schools we have also—the schools that we engage, students do choose some of these schools and based on demand for spaces we may allocate them. So that within the private schools you have a similar issue taking place where all the schools do not necessarily get the same average input from the students coming out of the SEA. So there are variations.

We have had two schools, based on the data we have, that are not on par with some of the others. But when you do a comparative between the student intake in those schools, and even comparable government schools they are on par. So we treat it from a general perspective where schools are under performing. And looking at the issues and therefore, I mean, currently, for example, in the Ministry we have a school-based management model, which is looking at school development planning and using that process to drive school improvement. So that the visits by school supervisors to schools really also engage that in terms of identifying areas of weakness and working along with them.

In addition to that, private schools are also invited to training and other workshops and support. In fact, private schools also receive the same level of support whether it is laptops or school feeding or transport. So we do work with these schools in terms of trying to move all the schools up.

Mr. Mark: What mechanisms are in place to monitor these students at those private secondary schools to ensure that the expectations of the Ministry are being met, or are being realized? What mechanisms do we have in place to monitor?

Mr. Seecharan: Well, as I said there are two key areas that we focus on. One is a multiple-disciplinary approach, where under our school-based management model you have the Division of School Supervision, the Division of Curriculum and Student Support Services Division working together. So that school visits identify and focus on a number of areas that contribute to school improvement. So, for example, teaching and learning, a visit to a private secondary school will pay particular attention to curriculum implementation, teacher qualification; a visit to schools, on the side with supervision, will look at the administrative processes in the school, student support services in terms of where we can provide support for students particularly those receiving challenges.

So that through the school visits we work—and it is a process. We work with schools. Basically what the Ministry has done is, notwithstanding, that these are private schools that we have purchased places in, we have actually translated the same approach to what we do with government and government-assisted schools across the private schools.

Mr. Mark: Now, I also would like to have some clarification on the mechanisms that would be used to address students who might drop out of the private secondary school system, and exactly how and when, given your surveys, or your information, how would we be able to capture those developments and what mechanisms are there to reintegrate those students who may fall through the cracks at the private secondary school system? Because as you are aware we are paying money to these secondary school management, or managers, or owners. So we would want to ensure that we get value for our money in terms of quality outputs. So could you share with us what has been the experience thus far?

Mr. Seecharan: Okay, let me just address first the issue of the Ministry payment in relation to students that we have placed in these schools. We have checks that are done so that we, the Ministry of Education pays for students who are in schools. So those who we have placed and are still in the school. And there is an elaborate process for verification down to checking student attendance registers to make sure that they are in school. Where we have instances where students have dropped out of the system, and I guess it is across the education sector, that information is brought to us, or we find out through school visits, we have the social workers within the Ministry who will attempt to visit homes if possible.

I will be honest with you, in many instances we have had challenges across the sector not just private schools in terms of finding some of these students. I mean, there are occasions where we have actually engaged the police in terms of trying to locate, based—so in terms of student dropout, the data we have, which is collected through the Division of Education Planning does not suggest a very high dropout rate. However, we know that there are students within the system, sometimes, where we attempt to reach and they change addresses if you try to follow them, and so that we know it is an area we are looking at but we know there are challenges there.

Mr. Mark: Would you say, or could you share with us numbers or percentages, on average, that would fall through the cracks on an annual basis? And if you could also share with us, at what stage, or what phase of the education system, the private system I am talking about here, would you find students actually migrating out and you cannot locate them? Is it after they complete the first three forms—Form 1, Form 2, Form 3; or is it at Form 4 level or Form 5? What is the data telling us, and what is the percentage or numbers involved in that experience?

Mr. Seecharan: Chair. I am not in a position to give you the details of that. I mean, we can provide you with that because I will need to—I do not want to give information and mislead. So, I would prefer to give you that, if you require, in terms of writing.

In terms of when students tend to drop out, I do not know that it is limited to any particular year group, for various reasons, and a lot of it has to do with I guess home factors. Students may leave at different points. But as I said, if my memory serves me right, I think we may have an overall dropout rate of less than 1 per cent, or 1 to 2 per cent, somewhere there. So the numbers are not necessarily high, but I am aware that in the private schools we do check on a termly basis in terms of attendance of students, against who we have placed, so that that data should be available.

3.20 p.m.

Mr. Mark: And you would be able to generate that in writing for the Chairman? I just wanted also to clarify for your good self, to clarify the robust verification process which was implemented in September of last year, to ensure that accurate payments were made to the private institutions. Would you want to share with this Committee some of elements making up this robust verification process?

Mr. Seecharan: Chair, when students are placed on the basis of SEA there is a list of students that we generate, and checks are therefore made against that list. So, we have a listing of students that are actually placed in the school and when we are looking at submission of claims we actually go into the schools with the listing of students that we have placed in the schools, we check attendance registers at the level of the schools to make sure that the students on our list and that the claim that is being submitted to actually match.

We also ensure—there are few instances where based on merit there may be a few transfers either in or out of the school. The transfers must be accompanied. So if there is an additional student based on a transfer it must be accompanied by an approval from the office of the Chief Education Officer so that, on a termly basis in terms of claims submitted, supervisors go in and do that check to make sure that what we pay for is actually what is there in the school system. We have had issues with errors in terms of submissions and claims, and that process helps to clarify. We have also had delays in payments with respect to errors in terms of the accounting function, and we have developed very clear guidelines, both for supervisors in terms of documents required at the level of the school and what principals need to submit, what supervisors need to check, and what is required in terms of meeting the requirements for finance and accounts to effect payment.

In fact, before it goes to finance and accounts, the claims coming forward from the school is submitted to the office of the Director of School Supervision where we have persons who actually go through every single claim to verify what is being submitted for us and what is the accurate thing. That has contributed in the past to some delays, but we have to ensure that what we pay for is what we receive.

Mr. Mark: Mr. Chairman, may I finally ask Mr. Seecharan, having regard to this new system that we in the past in his absence may have contributed to maybe delays in payments to the private secondary schools, could you indicate whether with this new robust verification system, the possibility of unnecessary delays in payment and the elimination of errors that may have arisen because of the lack of proper verification would be a thing of the past?

Mr. Seecharan: Yes. In fact, Chair, we have already—I mean, I think the public is aware that we have had issues with payments being delayed and sometime instances where we have actually made payments in the second term as opposed to the first term. We pay on a termly basis. With the new system in place we have completed payments with the first term, and our goal really is to, within the first month of the term that payments would be effected. In fact, I think the process is working excellent and we are way ahead in terms of processing for the second term. So, we have actually seen the benefit of standardizing the process, getting everybody on board in terms of ensuring that they know what is required, and so far it is working, and we hope in terms of streamlining the process we can get to where payments can be effected within the first month of the term.

Mr. Chairman: PS if I may, through you, just to follow up with a couple of questions raised by member Mark, and just to put this in perspective Mr. Seecharan. Can you give us an idea of the number of secondary school places that are available in the public schools on an annual basis?

Mr. Seecharan: The number of spaces that are available on an annual basis varies. It ranges somewhere between 16,000 and 17,000. Let me explain. We have had changes in the demographic in terms of students writing SEA so that, for example, if we go back to, let us say 2009, it may have been in terms of students writing SEA would have been 17,000; in 2018 it is 19,139. So that there has been a change in the student population over the years. Side by side with that, in terms of meeting the needs where we have to look at government and government assisted versus private, there are occasions where we may have to put an extra class in a school, so it means that the next year the numbers are reduced. But, generally, I think around 16,000 or closer to 17,000, and the gap which is currently around a thousand is made up between the private schools and Servol.

Mr. Chairman: So you are saying the number of places in the private schools is approximately a thousand?

Mr. Seecharan: No, I am saying that we have to—the questions here are related specifically to private schools. We have a combination of spaces and private school which on an annual basis we utilize about 600, and we have Servol spaces which may be the difference between approximately a thousand that we make up. So, overall we may utilize between 800 and a thousand spaces to make up the difference, about 600 of those would be in the private schools and the rest in Servol.

Mr. Chairman: Right. So, I just wanted to be clear in my mind, the Committee and for the public, in terms—I know you would have looked at this as well, but the criteria for the allocation of those spaces for the private schools?

Mr. Seecharan: Okay, let me just step back, because in terms of the management of this process it centres around three core issues. One, the selection of the schools, and

I indicated that that is guided by a Cabinet Note, and that initial approval would have identified and allowed us to use a certain number of schools. We have 12 now. We have only added one to that. So, basically in terms of whether we change schools or not, at a school depends on the need for spaces.

If we do a comparative of spaces within government and government-assisted schools, and actually spaces, because we do have a number of students who score under 30 and repeat, under 30 per cent, you may find that there are spaces available elsewhere, but because you have to match student placement in terms of where they live, you find that there are areas along, let us say, the East-West Corridor, Diego Martin, and a couple other areas in the country where, notwithstanding spaces available elsewhere, you have to find spaces within those jurisdictions. So, in the case of the one school that we have added, what we found in that particular year there was a gap of about 100 and something that we needed to fill, and there was one school within the area which we engaged to create those spaces.

In terms of the distribution of the 600 you would see that there would be variation from school to school within the 12 I have mentioned. What happens is that on the basis of students' registration and SEA we then look at the numbers, and based on those numbers we would have estimates of what is needed. We also, both in government and government-assisted and private schools we normally go year to year, even though we have an idea, and ask them in terms of availability of space, how much can you accept with the proviso that and the private schools, and even the students would know that we really place students based on closing the gap as opposed to any number you want. So, you could have 500 spaces, but if you only need 150 we place 100. So, it really depends on where the spaces are required and the availability of the schools to accept, so that the private schools do indicate to us that, okay, I can take up to this number. We would then place based on what our requirement is.

Mr. Chairman: I hear you. Now, I noted in your submission you spoke of a procedure for addressing underperformance, I know member Mark would have raised it, but can you define, maybe more specifically, how do you measure the performance?

Mr. Seecharan: I think in the submission what they were referring to is twofold. One is in terms of operation of schools and the standards for operation. The second, and what a lot of people look at is actual student performance. We have not drawn one benchmark across schools and say well all schools are required to have students achieving a 50 per cent pass rate. As I said, what we do is we look at the students that we place in schools, and on the basis of the students that we place and their scores in SEA, then one would expect that there would be a differential in terms of that performance. What we expect to see, however, is that schools, from wherever they are currently or they would have been a year or two years ago that their performance actually start moving in a positive direction.

Another way we do that comparison is that we look at comparative schools, let us say for the government secondary schools if we are looking at performance, we do not compare all schools across the board, but we look at similar schools with similar intake and see whether one school is lagging behind. Chair, this is a work in progress. We have in fact, as I said, introduced a school-based management model, we have introduced school development planning in our schools, and as I said we still have a number of schools, including private schools who maybe are not where we would like them to be, but it is a process and we recognize that would not happen overnight.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. If I may just refer you back to your school based management model, and I note that it is part of your team, you have officers of the school support—the Student Support Services Division, and you know with the fact that we seem to have a lot of psychosocial issues amongst students in school and so on that frequently make the headlines, can you indicate whether you are satisfied that the staffing in terms of the student support and the allocation is adequate for the needs of the students at this point in time? Can you shed some light on this?

Mr. Seecharan: We have on the establishment, if we take all the personnel within Student Support Services, in excess of 600, maybe six to 700 persons made up of guidance, social work, special-Ed, and we have a number of clinical behavioural specialists. There are a number of vacancies. I think it is about over a hundred, where we have conducted interviews and are in the process of filling. So that, I think if we get all of those positions filled we would be in a much better place. Side by side with that, we are looking at in the Ministry of how we organize those services so that we can maximize. I think the intention is to have all schools have access to the service. Part of the challenge we have, I think within the system is that I am not sure that all school personnel are aware of some of the services that we provide.

So, really we are looking at how we can improve the efficiency of the division by doing a number of things by looking at how the services are organized. We are looking at—and through the system, because if it is done in a systemic way we can actually optimize that. We are looking at screening at the primary schools so that we can actually follow students through the system as opposed to after they enter secondary schools, or when they crop up and they are referred. So, we are relooking at that. But I think in terms of personnel, if we get all the positions filled I think we would be able to provide a much better service than currently exists.

Mr. Chairman: So just to clarify Mr. Seecharan, the 600 thereabouts figure, is that the establishment or is that the current number of bodies on the jobs?

Mr. Seecharan: Okay, let me just be careful here. When we use establishment within the public service we are talking about permanently appointed positions. Within the Student Support Services we have a combination of both, persons on the establishment that are permanently appointed together with contract positions.

Mr. Chairman: So total numbers?

Mr. Seecharan: Yes.

Mr. Chairman: So, that is the 600 total numbers?

Mr. Seecharan: Yes. It may a "lil" bit over that.

Mr. Chairman: So how many vacancies? Can you give us an idea of how many vacancies?

Mr. Seecharan: I think it is a "lil" bit over 100, maybe about 110. Some of that had to do with challenges and identifying persons to fill positions, but I know interviews have been conducted, and I think we are in the process of filling most of those.

Mr. Chairman: Are you satisfied that this number is an adequate number for the number of students that they have to service together with the issue of so many problems that seem to be arising in the schools, primary and secondary?

Mr. Seecharan: I think before we get to doing the numbers game, I think we need to optimize and make what we have more efficient. I am not satisfied at this point that we have the most efficient arrangement. I think within what we have, for example in government and government-assisted secondary schools we have enough officers where we can have one per school. In all instances, it is not allocated one per school, but you may have some of them operating within clusters. So that currently, as I said, what we were doing is looking at how the service is organized. I think if we address that then we might be in a better position to say whether we need additional staff. I do think we are optimized at this point with the existing staff that we have.

Mr. Chairman: With all due respect PS and Chief Education Officer, then what I would assume that it is at this level that you would be able to increase the efficiency and optimize the allocation. So what is the challenge then that is preventing this from happening as we speak?

Mr. Seecharan: Actually, and that is what I said, is that we are currently looking at that. We are currently in the process of looking at how we allocate or revisit how staff is allocated. We are looking at clarifying roles and functions. We have had duplication and overlap of what people do. So, for example we have smaller number of social workers, but they are really intended to treat with some of the home issues and some of the social issues, whereas the guidance officers deal with more career issues and day-to-day issues at the level of the school. We have had some overlap of those functions, and therefore I am saying if we streamline that there may not be the need for a social worker to be located in the school, but through a referral process and having that preliminary intervention through the guidance officer we might be able to more efficiently utilize what we have working out of our district teams.

Mr. Chairman: So you are saying to students and teachers and parents that that is an active ongoing process which hopefully would be optimal in the near future?

Mr. Seecharan: Yes.

Mr. Chairman: And before I leave to the other members, I just wanted to raise the issue of the standards of the teachers in the private institutions. Now, I note in your submission that the teachers are required to be qualified and registered at the Ministry of Education. The question is, can you tell me a bit more about this registration process, about how often it is updated and so on, accreditation and things like that?

Mr. Seecharan: Okay, let me just differentiate between teacher registration and qualification for the job that they are doing. The registration process would have been started way back, and the Ministry is required to keep a register of teachers. So, in the earlier days once you had five subjects you could register as a teacher. It means that you would be on the register of teachers. However, that does not mean that you are qualified to teach. So that somebody teaching at the secondary level would be expected to have ideally a university degree in the subject area.

So that what happens at the private schools when we do our checks—for of all for a school to be registered as a private school apart from the statutory requirements which we outlined in our submission, there are checks done by a team from the Ministry looking at not just the facilities and all of that, but looking at teacher qualifications and whether the institution has the requisite staff that can actually deliver the programmes, and through the visits that I spoke about earlier then checks would be made on a periodic basis. Some of the schools would have had some issues with turnover because of salaries, and given what they were receiving per student. But that qualification issue is the checks are done when school visits are made. So, when we go to institutions, if they do not have the requisite staff, that is going to be addressed at the level of the school where it is brought to the attention of the administration that we have a gap here that needs to be closed.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. Is there any thought or any process in place, and maybe I am just asking your opinion here, in terms of what I would term recertification of teachers, similar to what occurs for pilots and the medical profession, because you are dealing with young impressionable minds?

Mr. Seecharan: We have had discussions on licensure at the Ministry of Education. Within the Caribbean I know Jamaica would have done some work. It requires some legislative changes. So, it is something that we have had and we have been looking at in terms of teacher professional development. That will take some time, we are not quite there yet, and there are some key stakeholders that need to come on board before we can implement that system.

Mr. Chairman: So you are saying that it is something that you are in favour of?

Mr. Seecharan: I think it is something that we need to look at, certainly, the requirement for teachers to up skill. We have been using some alternative strategies. So, for example, some of the training we are doing, we are providing teachers with whether it is a certificate outlining content and course hours. In some cases it might be getting credit for institutions and where they can pursue additional training. So, we are adding value to that. Part of the challenge we face in terms of making sure that teachers up skill, is that there is nothing in terms of the collective agreement that says that they must complete so many contact hours and all of that.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. Member Deonarine.

Ms. Deonarine: Thank you, Chair. So I want to dial back a "lil" bit, because I keep hearing you mention the Student Support Services Unit, and not only for my benefit for the benefit of the listening public, could you define for us or explain to us what is the role of Student Support Services Unit in the Ministry of Education?

Mr. Seecharan: It is multi-facetted. We have a number of students within the system who have numerous challenges. Our core function within the Ministry is really bringing about student learning, and there may be barriers to that. Some of it might be special needs, some of that might be social issues and family issues. So it is really multi—some of it might even be medical issues, which may be outside of our purview, but at least we need to be able to identify. So that the Student Support Services Division has been actually set up to do a number of things: Career pathing and how we guide students along particular careers. Our Special Ed Unit deals with and provide support for students whom may have learning disabilities and other challenges, whether it is ADHD or—and it could be dealt with at that level or through a referral process, and then we have the social workers. We have also added on top of that a number of clinical and behavioural officers, and they provide another level of intervention. It is not up to the numbers we want right now, but that is part of the thinking, and what we provide. So it really about getting or assisting students in terms of levelling the playing field and ensuring that all of them can have access to learning.

Ms. Deonarine: Okay, thank you. So, for example, if I am a teacher in an ECCE centre, and I identify from my daily teaching to my students, I identify one child that may have a learning disability, perhaps a special needs child, what is the process that I have to follow in order to access the Student Support Services Unit?

Mr. Seecharan: The process is the same for the different levels, and I am saying that because the provision of support for the ECCE centre has been the latest in terms of coming on board. Initially we were focusing more on the primary and secondary schools. Essentially, what should come from the centre is a request, through the senior teacher or the administrator to the Student Support Services Division. So once that request comes, and there is a form which they are required to complete, we can fast track that, so now whether it is through email or in some cases where there is already communication between the officer at the district and the school, a direct request can be made. So, essentially, it is really a request for assistance to us to provide support. We do not have, like at the secondary schools or at the primary schools, officers directly attached to the ECCE centres. The request has to come from the school.

Ms. Deonarine: So when this request is made, right, before the Student Support Services Unit offers their services to the child, is not a diagnosis required at some point? Because the teacher's suspicion that the child may be special needs is not definite, right?

Mr. Seecharan: I do not know if you are going the way of having a diagnosis done by a specialist. The process that we utilize, and both at the primary school, normally what is expected at the level of the school, and as you indicated, a teacher may have a suspicion so that the teacher is required to make a note of observations. So that is, I guess, in a sense what we refer to as basics screening. We have not rolled out that process in terms of training to all the ECCE centres. It is something that we are in the process of doing. So that basic screening followed by the next level where you would have, whether it is the Special Education Teacher I, looking at the child and doing a next level assessment, and determining whether it needs to go on or whether there could be recommendations in terms of treating with what is observed. So, it is a multi-level approach. In severe cases, a psycho-ed may be required. We are in fact also looking at how we can increase the number of psycho-eds, utilizing both in-house staff and maybe through a process of outsourcing some of those.

Ms. Deonarine: Okay, so on average how long—what is the timeline for accessing the service, and the child actually receiving education suitable to their needs?

Mr. Seecharan: Once the request is received by Student Support Services they are expected to attend to it immediately. As I said, the way staff is deployed, if for example an officer who has responsibility for a particular cluster of schools is unavailable it may take more than a day, but generally once a request is received they are required to look at it in terms of prioritizing what is required and providing the necessary support. As I said before, the ECCE centre is now coming on stream in terms of us providing that support, so that we are still working in terms of ensuring—so there may be gaps currently in the process, but we are looking at that.

Mr. Meyer: If I may, one of the issues we have been having has been exactly the reporting of the issues. So what we will be doing in the next month will be to launch an online system from the Ministry's website, so you can refer directly to the Student Support Services Division rather than the paper form going through the system. So that should speed up the time.

3.50 p.m.

Ms. Deonarine: Okay. My other question is with respect to how adequately equipped our teachers are within the public education system in dealing with providing education to special needs children.

Mr. Seecharan: You have asked me a difficult question. I think you have varying degrees of preparedness. We have special educators in some schools who are also working as teachers. On the other extreme, you may have some teachers who feel well that is not their job so you need to get a specialist. So it varies. Part of our strategy in terms—as I indicated earlier, we are working to have, for example, all students in primary school screened. That process will require training of all teachers or certainly a critical mass at the level of the school in terms of that early screening and identification and then working through that process with Special Ed. and next level intervention if we need. We have to do that process in the primary schools. So that part of what we are doing is trying our best to equip teachers in terms of at least that preliminary screening for students, an identification, and then providing the necessary support. Again, the support that is required may be that strategies that are required are shared with teachers and the teachers implement or there may be instances where the special education person may have to actually go in and work with the students.

Ms. Deonarine: Okay, so is the Student Support Services Unit currently adequately staffed or you have vacancies for specialist positions?

Mr. Seecharan: Well, I indicated earlier, I think the question was asked already, that we have a number of vacancies and a number of those are within the Special

Education Unit. We have conducted interviews and we are in the process of filling those. There are some challenges in terms of also getting personnel with the requisite skill set to fill some of the positions. So you may find that notwithstanding our willingness to fill the positions, that we may not always get all the positions filled because of personnel availability.

Ms. Deonarine: Is there an annual allocation to that division? And could you give us—or maybe you might want to submit it in writing if you can. What has been done in the past couple of years, allocation?

Mr. Seecharan: We will submit it. It would require collation from different votes, so that you may have allocation within programmes done by the division, you have salaries on a different vote. So it would require some collation before we can submit.

Ms. Deonarine: Okay. So both the allocation and the actual for maybe the past two or three years.

Mr. Seecharan: Yeah, okay.

Ms. Deonarine: I will pause for now Chair, thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. Member Simonette.

Mr. Simonette: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Good afternoon. Mr. Meyer you mentioned that the Ministry was in the process of looking at a rationalization of institutions under its purview and I wondering whether you could assist us a little more with that. Because when one looks at your report it seems that there is considerable overlap, and I would ask you to comment on that, between some of the vocational training institutions or companies and one wonders what is the current approach, if you could share that with us, as to bring in some rationalization into play. One pointed example is the Metal Industries Company Institute of Technology.

Mr. Meyer: Overlap and duplication, that is waste, bottom line, there is no other way to say it. We have recognized that we have quite a number of agencies doing many things for TVETS and other areas, but we may not be actually getting the best value for money. There may not be a robust path. For example, there was an unfortunate incident where a child from Couva West died, was shot committing a robbery. And the child, I believe the father said that the child wanted to be a welder. It is interesting that, is there a path to become a welder? There is a particular course, but is there a path getting to be a master welder. We do not have those paths quite just yet, yet we have a number of agencies doing a number of things. So what we are trying to do is to eliminate waste, eliminate duplication. But as I said before it is very early and we have not yet even engaged the agencies to a large extent in this matter. But we are aware of it because there are financial implications to what we are doing right now. The money is not what it used to be, so we are having to do much more with significantly less.

Mr. Simonette: And on the question of—sticking with the vocational studies, has the Ministry looked at especially in the light of the renewed thrust to the CSME, the question of certification, again, if you go back to welders, carpenters, et cetera. Is the Ministry engaged in reviewing, lifting the certification or qualitative badges that can be applied to those who successfully complete relevant courses?

Mr. Meyer: We are actively doing that with the Accreditation Council and NTA right now.

Mr. Simonette: Turning back to the question of special needs and I wonder if Mr. Seecharan could assist, please. My colleague Sen. Deonarine who was asking a few questions on the provisioning of the special unit, I think that we all, it is in the public domain that schools for special needs children are run primarily by private institutions. Are you Mr. Seecharan satisfied with the level of interaction, support and collaboration by the Ministry with such private institutions? Sorry, Mr. Seecharan I have to say, I know that you may not have come prepared to deal with this issue, it is not specifically on your report, but it is a topic that was actually raised in the Senate yesterday on a Private Motion.

Mr. Seecharan: On the first level we provide funding support for a number of private institutions and I am aware that there—we have constant collaboration with these institutions. That could be in terms of providing support but also in terms of that verification process for providing the funding where again on a termly basis the officers from within the Student Support Services Unit would visit. So based on those visit if there are practices that are out of line with what the expectations are they would be highlighted, because there are clear criteria, which I do not have in front of me, but there are criteria in which funding will be provided for school, including, again, whether there are qualified teachers, whether the facilities are up to standard. I think across the special education sector there is the need for improvement and I know we are actively pursuing that. Are we where we should be or are we comfortable? I would prefer that be addressed by maybe the director or the manager from Student Support Services since Special Ed is not, that area is not my area of expertise, but we are working towards at least to getting to where we should be.

Mr. Simonette: Mr. Seecharan in the estimates for the 2018/2019 budget there is a figure given for grants to assisted primary schools of—I believe it is $59.1 million. Can you indicate whether that includes assistance to special needs schools?

Mr. Seecharan: No. That is, when we talk about assisted school, those would be what we refer to as the denominational schools. There is a separate provision for private special schools.

Mr. Simonette: I wonder, through the Chairman, if I could ask that you could give us some assistance on that breakdown as it is applied to private special schools, please. Thank you. So Vice-Chairman, that will be all for now.

Brig. Gen. Antoine: Good afternoon. In dealing with your internal fraud policy and your whistle-blowing policy, there was an instance of whistle-blowing at NIHERST. The matter was investigated. The officer involved was admonished and a recommendation that a relevant policy should be amended was done. However, a report was not submitted to the Ministry of Education. I would like to know, what was the outcome of the issue at NIHERST, if you could provide details? And why was a report not submitted to the Ministry of Education and what was the admonition given to the officer?

Mr. Meyer: We only learnt of that incident very recently. We have written to NIHERST for clarification and as soon as we get clarification we can forward the information. We ourselves are not aware of what the incident was.

Brig. Gen. Antoine: So you will forward the information to me?

Mr. Meyer: We will get the information.

Brig. Gen. Antoine: When will a draft whistle-blowing policy for the National Training Agency be completed?

Mr. Meyer: They have not given us a time on that one, yet, but we have timelines on all of their policies, everybody's policy we are monitoring them. But I cannot say exactly when that one is going to be delivered.

Brig. Gen. Antoine: And how are persons encouraged to report misconduct in state agencies to the Ministry of Education?

Mr. Meyer: There is no formal policy right now on that. What happens is sometimes we do get unsigned reports from members of staff, but we do not have any policy. The difficulty we have right now, I think it is because there is no overarching whistle-blower legislation in the country, it is the difficult for an employee to blow the whistle without any kind of statutory protection. There is a slight bit of it under the Procurement Act, but generally there is none. So we are in a bit of a bind there.

Brig. Gen. Antoine: So you are dependent on the overall whistle-blowing?

Mr. Meyer: Well, as again, if you have to get to the point of whistle-blowing it means that your monitoring is not where it should be. Because really you should be in a place as an entity that you should not have to depend on somebody to do that. Your system should be robust enough that you know what is going on in the organization and you should not have to depend on an individual to tell you about it. It will be nice but I think the real problem here is the protection for that individual. The victimization is that this is a small country, even with unsigned letters you can know who probably did it and you need protection for those individuals.

Mr. Chairman: PS if I may, one of the mechanisms that you have at your disposal for oversight and oversight of these state enterprises is really what we are about today, would be the forwarding of audited financial statements and Appendix I of your submission I know that the EFCL—well the financial statements outstanding for 2015/2016 up to 2017/2018, can you give us any reason as to why that has not happened?

Mr. Meyer: EFCL, there are some challenges with the EFCL. We are working with them to try to get that done as quickly as possible. The last couple of years with the EFCL has been very challenging.

Mr. Chairman: Do you have any time frame perhaps in mind as to when you expect some resolution of this matter?

Mr. Meyer: At this point in time, no, there is no time frame for the resolution.

Mr. Chairman: PS, I also note with regard to your submission on project management that site visits mechanism to monitor and manage projects and I speak specifically here now to the projects that would be partially completed and schools that are close to completion. So my first question is, is there any policy within the Ministry to complete schools that are already in construction before you start new schools or new projects?

Mr. Meyer: We do not have the ability to start any new schools at this point in time. All we can do basically is try to really finish what we have constructed. The only thing that we have had to do is serious emergencies. Like, for example, the earthquake, the earthquake damaged quite a number of schools and there were a couple of schools that have been a total loss and in those cases we had to rebuild. But other than that a brand new school from scratch, no. What we are trying to do is to fix, well not fix, complete what we have already on the books.

Mr. Chairman: I am just, you know PS I am just trying to understand because I am aware of two schools that fall within my constituency. One, is the Siparia Union Presbyterian School and the other would be the Siparia East Secondary School that are very far along in terms of completion. Can you perhaps explain to the Committee and to the population what would be the particular challenges that would prevent the speedy completion of these schools and others like those?

Mr. Meyer: The bottom line is money. I believe the rough figures to complete all the outstanding schools would be upwards of $5 billion. Our allocation this year for new school construction was, I think, approximately $297 million.

Mr. Chairman: So when you are given that kind of allocation, is there a process in place in the Ministry that allows you to prioritize which schools you will complete and how do you arrive at the criteria for such prioritization?

Mr. Meyer: It is usually the schools that are closest to go. Like we have a 99 per cent school, it will go before a 98 per cent school if it come down to something as simple as that.

Mr. Chairman: And that is across the board?

Mr. Meyer: Well, generally across the board, yes.

Mr. Chairman: Right. In terms of those schools that are still awaiting completion, does your project management team, for example, do site visits because many of these schools would be overgrown with bushes and so on, and would present sometimes hazards of different nature. Is it that part of the remit of the site visits to visit these schools and deal with issues on the construction site or to ask the contractor to deal with it?

Mr. Meyer: There are schools in different stages of construction. Some of them the contractors will still be on site. They would have secured the site, those are easier to deal with. There are other schools, the contractors would have abandoned the sites and the sites would be taken over by the residents of the area. There are other schools the contractors would have abandoned the sites and the residents of the area will protect the sites. And our crew, we do have a crew that visits the schools, but what we do not have is the ability to defend all of our schools. We try our best to secure them but there are some sites that, again, it comes back to resources. We just do not have the money right now to do everything that we want to do.

Mr. Chairman: Can you give us an idea, an indication, of how many such structures in the construction phase across the country?

Mr. Meyer: The total number incomplete? It is about 161, roughly.

Mr. Chairman: And you are saying that in the instances where the contractors would have abandoned this site that you do not have enough personnel, enough resources to protect taxpayers' money that, so to speak, would already be on the ground.

Mr. Meyer: In some instances the site has not even been handed over to us. The contractor may have abandoned but it is still his site. There are a number of difficulties of even securing the sites. It is not a pleasant situation to work with right now. It is extremely challenging.

Mr. Chairman: So how do you deal with that situation where the contractor has abandoned but not hand it over.

Mr. Meyer: Well, in those cases we are trying—right now we are negotiating with contractors, all of them. We have paid quite a number of them. The problem is with, we had not paid a lot of contractors. So we have made some significant payments to contractors recently and right now we are in the process of trying to get these sites back on line as many as we can in the shortest possible period of time.

Mr. Chairman: Would you be in a position to provide a listing to the Committee of the projects that will be restarted and perhaps a time frame? Is that possible?

Mr. Meyer: Yes, that is doable. Yes, we can do that.

Mr. Chairman: All right, I would appreciate that. Member Mark.

Mr. Mark: Yes, thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I would like to direct this to the Permanent Secretary, my question that is. Permanent Secretary, you would agree with me that one of the key and critical responsibilities of any Permanent Secretary is to ensure that there is proper accountability, value for money and transparency. One of the areas that we are looking at today is the whole issue of oversight of state agencies that would fall under the purview of the Ministry of Education. And from your own submission we advise that the Ministry determines whether policies carried out efficiently, effectively and economically by the state agencies, by examining a number of reports and plans, whether it be strategic plans, annual business plans, administrative reports, board minutes, budgets, PSIP document, internal audit reports among others.

But in spite of this and the fact that the Ministry did indicate that many of their agencies, if not all, seem to be submitting their document reasonably on time. The reality shows as you have admitted that many reports remained outstanding. There is a time lag, for example, in the submission of the administration reports and audited financial statements as my colleague alluded to a short while ago.

Now, to address this situation we have been advised that the Ministry is developing a comprehensive monitoring framework to increase compliance. Now, as it relates to the submission of documents to the Ministry and to the Permanent Secretary, can you describe for this Committee the review process that is engaged or employed when documents are submitted by agencies to the Ministry of Education? Give us a tight summary and then you can put something in writing, subsequently. So just give us a tight summary.

Mr. Meyer: Okay. Well, it will basically depend on the type of document that is submitted. There would be different parts for the document. If it is board minutes, the path would usually be depending on the type of minutes, there would be a financial oversight, there would be HR, there would be internal audit depending on how, what the document would say.

If it is audited financial statements, that would be routed directly to the Finance and Accounts Divisions for them to give a review. If it is annual reports or any sort of project document, they will go to the Planning Unit. As I said before, we do not have a dedicated compliance unit so what we have done is we are operating a type of committee, type of operation where the document would be "round robined". They will make comments on it and then we will send back further clarification, questions, adjudication, depending on how the matters would go ahead. What we would like to do is eventually create a much more robust system, probably a dedicated compliance unit, maybe. Again, it comes back to numbers. We have 11 agencies right now and it is a lot. Perhaps if we had slightly less than 11 it will be a little easier to run with a committee type operation. But that is basically the type of approach we use right now.

Mr. Mark: So at this time as we speak there is no one, of course, you are the overall person in charge for the accountability process. But there is no particular unit that would be charged with the responsibility of reviewing these documents when they are submitted.

Mr. Meyer: Yes. There is a one particular unit that provides, I suppose for want of a better word, the Secretariat services for all of the divisions in the Ministry would have oversight and that would be the Research Planning and Technical Services Division.

Mr. Mark: But if my memory does not fail me I remember when you were here last year you did indicate that the intention was to establish a monitoring and evaluation unit within the Ministry to deal with these things as a dedicated unit. Did I get you right at that time?

Mr. Meyer: No, not quite correct. We do have a Monitoring and Evaluation Unit on the books, we just do not have any staff for it. And subsequent to that we found that the round robin committee type of approach was slightly more effective because it allowed the audit specialist, HR, accounts, even IT depending on what the matter would be to give their view and RTPS forms a sort of committee, overall, summary-type role.

Mr. Mark: So what mechanisms would be established or have been established by the Ministry as it relates to ensuring proper feedback on the various reports that would be submitted, so that you can get feedback on a timely basis. So if there are abuses, if there is nepotism, if there is fraud taking place at any of these agencies there is a mechanism or a series of mechanisms in place that would feedback and give you and the Ministry timely information. Is there any such mechanism?

Mr. Meyer: Well, in terms of fraud, nepotism we will really be depending on the reports that we receive from the agencies. As said before we are will be reviewing the work that they send to us. These are entities with their boards. They have procurement committees, they have compliance committees, they have audit committees, and they have internal audit units that are generally with people who are paid a lot more than my auditors. So I would expect that they would be doing their jobs, otherwise it would beg the question why do we have them. So we do have them to depend on to do their work. When it comes to us we will do the review. If there are any red flags that they would raise, we would then follow up with any questions. We peruse the board minutes, very, very, very, closely and that is where I think we pick up quite a number of, any issues at all we would flag at the board minutes. We also would look in the newspapers, sometimes things appear and we will ask questions there.

Mr. Mark: And this is why I come to the question, I am happy that you made reference to the board minutes and the meticulousness involved in looking at these board minutes. Now you would recall that sometime ago and I am sure it would have been submitted and you will advise me if I am wrong, in board minutes to the Ministry whether your Ministry was kept informed of the hiring of staff for managerial positions by any agency. Would your Ministry be kept abreast through board minutes of the engagement or employment of staff at the managerial level within those state agencies, through board minutes?

Mr. Meyer: If by managerial you would mean the senior executives?

Mr. Mark: Senior executives.

Mr. Meyer: We would definitely see the senior executives. In terms of any other staff increases, I think generally there was a Ministry of Finance circular that limited the—well, instructed the agencies to cease and desist additional hiring.

So if they are doing that, and they are doing that outside of the board minutes, well, that would not be good, but we have not seen any additional hiring at least through the board minutes in the present. They do not really have the money to do it right now because most of the agencies, there have been severe cuts this year.

4.20 p.m.

Mr. Mark: Now, would you agree with me that the Ministry of Education acts as a conduit between the Chief Personnel Office or Personnel Department, and the management of agencies in relaying guidelines from the CPO and positions from the relevant bargaining bodies for staff in those very agencies because they do not operate on their own? They are guided by the State.

Mr. Meyer: Yes. We have made that clear to the agencies that any negotiations, any increases in salary, anything like that would have to come to us so that we will be clear as to what is the direction.

Mr. Mark: Now, with regard to the occurrence of nepotism, the Ministry of Education has stated that nepotism was discovered at YTEPP in 2017 involving the former Chief Executive Officer. Now, the board of the agency, YTEPP, dealt expeditiously with the matter because the Ministry was not involved in that decision of course. What I would like to ask the Permanent Secretary, in terms of your oversight role of this particular state agency, did your Ministry receive a report with regard to the occurrence of nepotism at YTEPP; and if you did not receive a report, why not?

Mr. Meyer: We did not request a specific report of that incident because the matter had been dealt with, but I believe that—no, I do not think there was any other case after that.

Mr. Mark: But are you monitoring because of what took place there? Would the Ministry not be monitoring closely through all those documents that you receive, including board minutes, and seeking to ensure that there are no further incidents of nepotism?

Mr. Meyer: When we saw the question we did discuss how we were going to do that, because as it is right now—this is Trinidad and Tobago, it may be a little tricky to work out exactly the relationships. So we did discuss it and we are going to continue to do so, but as it stands right now, there is no real easy mechanism for us to do that. We would have to do something; we were just brainstorming. Perhaps request a list of all current staff at the senior executive level and a list of all their family members. It is going to be difficult for us to do. We are not really sure how to do it right just yet, but we are investigating it.

Mr. Mark: Do you know, Permanent Secretary, whether the wife of the former Chief Executive Officer is currently employed at YTEPP? Do you know? Or has—

Mr. Meyer: I will have to check and get back to you on that one.

Mr. Mark: Well, could you check and ask and give us in writing if that person is employed? And you could explain the reasons for the employment of that individual, and if not, was the job of that individual terminated? And if not, why not? You will have to explain in writing.

Mr. Meyer: Yes, I will do so.

Mr. Mark: Now, given that incident—because you see, this is dealing with oversight and I am coming to the point of the Ministry, even though you have some challenges when it comes to finances, which all of us are experiencing, including our Parliament, we have a duty to ensure that the moneys that are approved by the Parliament are properly spent. Now, given that particular incident that I have outlined, does the Permanent Secretary think it is necessary to have a plan for all agencies to deal with instances like what I have outlined? Do you think that there ought to be a plan to deal with these matters?

Mr. Meyer: Yes, I believe so. I know there are some private sector agencies that prohibit the employment of family members, and that is one of the things that we discussed. It is difficult because—perhaps a private sector organization can do that, but in the public sector, how do you prevent somebody from seeking employment in an organization. All that could be done maybe at the recruitment level is whoever is on the panel, if they happen to know the relative they have to recuse themselves. So that is kind of the road we were going down, but as I said we have not fully fleshed out that issue quite just yet, but we are looking at it.

Mr. Mark: Well, remember this is not a question about people seeking employment, you know. It is a question where an individual is in a position and is using his position to engage people. That is a big difference, and that is why I am asking in this specific case whether you would want to agree with me that there is need for a plan to deal with those instances where other agencies might fall prey to this same kind of practice which is undesirable and unacceptable. That is the point that I was making to you.

Mr. Meyer: Yes, I would agree. There must be integrity in all our recruitment processes, and that is one of the areas that we are looking at.

Mr. Mark: And could you advise whether measures are being implemented to prevent instances like what I have described from occurring at other agencies under the Ministry's purview?—seeing that this is a live experience and you certainly would not want a repetition of this in the future so you ought to be considering measures to prevent such occurring in the future. Would you not agree with me?

Mr. Meyer: Yes. As I said, we are actively reviewing our procedures on that matter.

Mr. Mark: And when would we be able to get a definitive statement or conclusion to your overview of these procedures? Is that going to be completed within a month?

Mr. Meyer: I am advised that it will be completed within a month.

Mr. Mark: Well, may I also invite you upon the completion of those procedures would you be kind enough to have a copy submitted to this Committee so we would be able to be guided as it relates to the future?

Mr. Meyer: Yes, we will do so.

Mr. Mark: Now, I am a bit disappointed that we did not have the Education Facilities Company with us today, but, of course, the Permanent Secretary could address this matter.

Now, there are a number of contracts that remain—involving schools, I am talking about here, and works that were not completed as at the 30th of September, 2017. And I am talking about expenditure amounting to about $32.4 million which was paid from inception involving the Education Facilities Company for construction works for two schools. The Chatham Government Primary School, the expenditure since inception in 2013 to September 30, 2017, total $14.4 million. We are advised that this project as of August of 2017 would have been 79 per cent completed. Then there is the Santa Flora Government Primary School, expenditure since inception in 2014 to the 30th of September, 2017, total $18.1 million. The status report in August of 2017 indicated that the project was 73 per cent completed. I would like to ask the Permanent Secretary the following question: Can you advise this Committee what is the status of these two projects as of today's date?

Mr. Meyer: Okay. If I am just to step back a bit, since the beginning of last fiscal, EFCL was unable to continue with any of the construction projects. So we lost quite a bit of time. In short, these two schools are what we consider to be priority, so we are actively trying to get the sites up and running. In fact, just this week we have had meetings with EFCL. The EFCL has had meetings with both the contractors and the consultants, and I think the latest update is that they are discussing getting the contractors back on site, probably as early as next week, but we just have a couple of final issues to deal with, extensions of time claims. Perhaps some additional payments will have to be made, but we are trying to finish these schools because these schools—they can be done relatively easily. The contractors have been not been terminated. They are actually on site so we can get them to be done. We can give you a more detailed status report, but that is a broad summary on what we need to do.

Mr. Mark: Yeah. I think our Committee would welcome a status report because we would like to know when these projects would be completed once the contractors are back on the job, as well as if you can provide us in that status report the initial cost of these two projects. We would appreciate that very much.

Now, there is another area that is of concern to our Committee and that deals with the internal audit. It appears from the situation at the Ministry—and you know internal audit is very important. You must have internal controls if you are to have proper accountabilities, but you have admitted, and I think earlier on both you and Mr. Seecharan admitted that the Ministry is faced with a severe staff shortage, and I know that you have made a request for additional staff. Tell us at this time, given the importance of the internal audit function as we speak, what is the complement of the internal audit and finance, and investment subcommittees of the board? What is the complement?

Mr. Meyer: Sorry?

Mr. Mark: Do you have an internal audit function or committee in the Ministry of Education?

Mr. Meyer: We have an internal audit unit in the Ministry of Education. It consists on the books establishment of 19 positions of auditor ranging from Auditor III to Auditing Assistants. Of those 19 positions, 14 are filled, but that is not really the issue. The real issue is the range level of staff. The top position is an Auditor III; that is a range 53. We are actually at the maximum that a Ministry can have in terms of level of staff. Anything higher than that falls under the purview of the Auditor General. But given the size of our Ministry and the oversight that is required, you would probably need staff who more of them were ACCA qualified who can be remunerated at that level. We only have one position that could be done like that and that is the Range 53, the top position, but that is not really an education issue. I think internal audit throughout the entire public service needs to be reviewed. I do not think it has ever been reviewed.

Mr. Mark: I understand your point. I think it is a whole evaluation, the job spec, and new classification and compensation system, I understand. Is the name of the internal audit committee, the internal audit and finance, and investment subcommittee; or do you have such a committee?

Mr. Meyer: No. We have an internal audit unit. I think the agencies probably have an audit committee and they would have an internal audit unit.

Mr. Mark: Okay. So in the Ministry of Education what we have is an internal audit committee with 19 established posts and you have 14 of those posts filled.

Mr. Meyer: What we have is an internal audit unit with 19 posts.

Mr. Mark: Unit with 14 persons—

Mr. Meyer: Yes.

Mr. Mark:—functioning?

Mr. Meyer: Fourteen auditors. We also have some other support staff, but in terms of audit staff we have only 14 people.

Mr. Mark: Would this internal audit committee have any relationship with those agencies that you supervised, meaning have oversight responsibility for?

Mr. Meyer: The accounting officer can direct her internal audit unit to visit the agencies if required. We have not yet had cause to do that. As I said before, these agencies have audit committees. They have very well-established audit units, and then also we are looking at the fact they report to the Investments Division too. There is the central audit unit. The Ministry of Finance is Auditor General. So there are a number of other players who are probably better placed in case of an emergency situation, a fraud matter, to look at them, but we can if we see the need. Up to now, we have not really come across anything that has raised enough red flags for us to say, "Well, we have to go in". If a red flag is raised to that extent, odds are we will call in the Ministry of Finance instantly.

Mr. Mark: In terms of the vacancy, you said you have four—

Mr. Meyer: Yes.

Mr. Mark: Have you, through the Human Resources Department, communicated to the Service Commissions Department for filling those four areas that are now vacant? And where are we with that?

Mr. Meyer: The matter is with the Service Commissions Department.

Mr. Mark: And how long?

Mr. Meyer: The vacancies were recent. So I think—it is with Service Commission for just a few weeks I believe.

Mr. Mark: A few weeks?

Mr. Meyer: Yes.

Mr. Mark: All right. Thank you very much. Mr. Chairman, I am good.

Mr. Chairman: PS, the other issue I would like to address in your submission is the issue of risk management, and, of course, you will agree that that is a very important oversight and monitoring mechanism. I note in your submission that it is stated that all agencies are expected to ensure that risk management controls are in effect at the agencies, and that the Ministry of Education does not have direct oversight mechanisms to monitor and evaluate the internal risk management controls of these state agencies, but you do have the fallback position where instances of risk are identified or detected from board minutes for example, or internal audit reports, other reports. So I have two questions here for you, one is that have you found any instances recently; has the Ministry had the need to investigate instances of risk at any agency based on a review of board minutes or other documents? Has that situation arisen?

Mr. Meyer: What has happened over the past year is that with our increased monitoring the agencies have been submitting to us documentation prior to implementing any sort of policy at all. So we have actually been mitigating the risk by performing a gatekeeper function at this point in time. So what has happened before is that we will find out after the fact, but because we are monitoring with a certain degree of rigour, they are coming to us first and asking a question before they implement. So our instance of activities that might have been risky, have been by and large mitigated over the past year.

Mr. Chairman: So that is still an informal arrangement. It is just a discretionary arrangement at this point in time.

Mr. Meyer: It is informal yes, but it says that our active monitoring has borne some fruits because it tells me that the agencies themselves have realized that things have changed.

Mr. Chairman: Well, let me ask you then, do you think that it is necessary for you as the Permanent Secretary to have direct oversight mechanisms in place to monitor these agencies? What are your thoughts on that?

Mr. Meyer: I would say yes, because if you have to give over a billion dollars of public funds to agencies, you would want to know from an oversight point of view, in at least real time, how that money is being spent. It does not profit the taxpayer for you to pick up on an issue after the money has been expended. We have had some very unfortunate incidents with agencies that have been in the public domain with purchases for certain devices. Yes, you can come down hard on the agency afterwards, yes, you can implement all the controls after the fact, but the point is the money has already been spent and the taxpayer has already lost.

Mr. Chairman: Have you within the Ministry, PS, made any representations to those who can effect that kind of change, or had any discussions with regard to moving in that direction?

Mr. Meyer: We are engaging with the Ministry of Finance regarding oversight. We have had quite a number of meetings with them, and this is one of the issues that we are going to be raising.

Mr. Chairman: PS, one of the other issues that troubles me throughout this submission that the Ministry has made is the issue of either late submission or no submission of the reports and other instruments that are necessary for you to confidently provide oversight. Are you satisfied that you have enough clout, for want of a better word, to ensure that these reports are more timely? Are there mechanisms? Are you satisfied that proper mechanisms are in place to ensure proper and timely reporting?

Mr. Meyer: The short answer would be no, and I think if you look at the first couple pages of the State Enterprises Monitoring Manual you will see a very interesting flow chart which will show you the reporting relationships, and that flow chart will tell you that it is not as clear as possible, and that is one of the issues we have raised with

Ministry of Finance. But I think they are also aware of it, and they are also currently reviewing the manual. But I think what has to happen—even what we are doing now is, we are generally I think not exceeding our authority, but we are making demands of the agencies and we are waiting for them to say no, and they have not said no yet.

Mr. Chairman: That was the answer to the question I was going to ask you, what has the response been to those demands? So if there are no further questions from members—

Mr. Mark: No further questions.

Mr. Chairman: Sorry. So PS, can I invite you to maybe make a closing statement, or perhaps suggestions that you would like for this Committee to take note of going forward, or recommendations, requests, in whichever way we can assist?

Mr. Meyer: Well, I think basically in closing I would just like to thank the Committee very much for their time and their patience. We have taken on board the comments that you have made. I think they have been productive. They do by and large dovetail with some of the things that we have been doing, and I think it has made it very clear that I think we are on the right path as far as oversight is concerned. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Okay. So PS, on behalf of the members of Committee and members of the Parliament staff, I would like to thank you and the members of your staff for making the time and sparing the effort to be with us here this afternoon to share and to engage in this discussion, and, of course, I would also want to thank the members of the media for being here and members of the listening public. So at this point in time I would want to say that the officials here are excused and this meeting is now suspended. Thank you very much.

4.46 p.m.: *Meeting adjourned.*