



Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

Education Towers, No.5 St. Vincent Street, Port of Spain, Trinidad

Ministerial Response

to the Recommendations/Comments

to

**The Twelfth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Social Services
and Public Administration on an Examination of the Current Level
of Childhood Obesity and the State's Interventions to Promote a
Healthy Lifestyle among Children**

RECOMMENDATIONS (pgs. 48-52)

Objective 2: To assess the services and facilities available to counteract and/or alleviate childhood obesity.

Recommendations

- A. Given the importance of environmental (e.g. access to healthy foods, marketing) and family factors (SES, consumption patterns) in childhood obesity, the MoH should give particular attention to the following macro-level interventions:**
- i. The planned policy initiative to treat with regulating snacks sold in schools;**
 - ii. Creating incentives for local food manufacturers to create products with reduced sugar, fats and additives;**
 - iii. The consideration of a “sugar tax” on sugar-sweetened beverages;**

The Ministry of Education (MoE) concurs with this recommendation. Further, the Ministry of Health (MoH) should collaborate with the MOE when developing the policy initiative to treat with regulating snacks sold in schools.

- B. That the MoH continue to provide sustained monitoring over the implementation of the Policy on the Sale of Sugar Sweetened Beverages in Schools to avoid losing progress made in combatting schools' obesogenic environments;**

The Ministry of Education concurs with this recommendation and will continue to collaborate with the MoH to support the sustained monitoring of this policy.

- C. That the MoH evaluate whether the childhood assessment clinics require increased allocations in order to be adequately equipped with the resources, equipment and staff to treat with ill and obese children;**

The Ministry of Education supports this recommendation.

D. That the MoE, MoH and MALF continue their collaboration on strategies to combat childhood obesity, as aligned with the National Strategic Plan for Prevention and Control of NCDs (2017-2021) and the CARPHA Plan of Action for Health Weights. In their responses to the Committee, the Ministries should provide an update on the collaborative initiatives in their work-plans for the latter half of 2019 and first quarter of 2020;

As part of the thrust to promote healthy lifestyles in schools, there is multi-sectoral committee headed by MOH including NSDSL, CPDD.

In keeping with strategies identified in the National Strategic Plan for Prevention and Control of NCDs (2017-2021), the Ministry of Education continues to collaborate with other stakeholders to combat childhood obesity with respect to the following:

a) Actions to Increase Physical Activity in Schools

The provision of physical activity equipment for government, government assisted and Special Schools is central to the national plan for increasing physical activity in schools. In this regard, the Ministry of Education worked with the Project Consultant, Rapid Assessment for Physical Activity Capacity and the Ministry of Health to validate the list of physical activity equipment to be procured for government and government assisted primary schools. Additionally, the Ministry of Education will be providing technical assistance during the bid evaluation process for the said equipment. It is anticipated that the Ministry of Health and the Central Tenders Board will continue their work regarding procurement of the physical activity equipment in the second quarter of Fiscal 2019/2020.

With respect to the provision of equipment for the government and government assisted secondary and Special Schools, the Ministry of Education collaborated with the Project Consultant regarding interrogation of the proposed list of equipment to be procured and the Interim Report, Rapid Assessment for Physical Activity Capacity in Secondary and Special Schools during the first quarter of Fiscal 2019/2020. Suggestions are currently being considered pertaining to the development of a Requisition Form for schools to indicate the quantity of equipment needed. It is anticipated that in the second quarter of Fiscal 2019/2020, the Final Report, including the recommended list of equipment for schools, will be submitted for approval.

b) Development of National School Health Policy

The Ministry of Education and Ministry of Health engaged in working group meetings to review the proposed National School Health Policy during the period October – December, 2019. In addition, a National Consultation on the policy was held in December 9, 2019. The recommendations arising out of the National Consultation are currently being considered with regard to inclusion into this policy. The Ministry of Education anticipates that in the second quarter of 2019/2020 that the Ministry of Health, who leads this initiative, will take steps to continue the development of the policy which when finalised, will be forwarded for Cabinet's approval.

c) Increasing Health Literacy in Schools

As part of the thrust to promote healthy lifestyles among students in primary schools, a multi-sectoral committee is responsible for developing the National Healthy Lifestyle Reader and Quiz for Standard Three (3) students. This Committee which is headed by the Ministry of Health includes representatives from NSDSL and the Curriculum Planning and Development Division.

In the first quarter of fiscal year 2019/2020, the Ministry of Education provided support at the National Primary Schools Teacher Sensitisation Seminar for Standard Three (3) Teachers held in November 13, 2019. In addition, the Ministry of Education is currently in the process of providing technical advice to the National Primary Schools Healthy Lifestyles (NPSHL) Quiz Committee with regard to the writing of items for the NPSHL Quiz 2020. This Quiz is scheduled to take place during the period January – February 2020.

In terms of increasing students' awareness of healthy habits, the MoE managed an information booth at the launch of the "Water Wednesday Initiative" for primary schools at the NIHERST National Science Centre in December 11, 2019. This activity highlighted the importance of drinking water in maintaining healthy lifestyles. In addition, the MoE in collaboration with the Ministry of Health, continues to monitor compliance in our ongoing initiative pertaining to the *Prohibition on the Sale or Serving of Sugar Sweetened Beverages at School Cafeterias/Canteens*.

E. That the MoE develop innovative strategies to encourage increased total participation in sports and PE in secondary schools. The MoE may consider the feasibility of instituting at least one mandatory PE period per week for students not pursuing PE for CSEC exams. Appropriate social incentives or "credits" may be used to encourage student participation;

The MoE concurs with this initiative. The Physical Education curricula is flexible, balanced and inclusive to cater to the needs of all students, regardless of their physical abilities. The MoE continues to encourage schools to utilise a system of incentives aimed at enhancing students' participation in physical activities. Participation in aerobics classes, walkathons, marathons and in-house and after-school co-curricula activities that address students' needs, interest and choice are offered at schools.

The Ministry is currently considering the logistics of implementing the mandatory one (1) period of Physical Education per week for students in Forms Four (4) to Six (6).

F. That by February 2020, the MoE should collate data from schools to determine the total number of sports coaches that are engaged, their sports fields and the number of students engaged. Information about sports areas and schools with insufficient sports coaches should be relayed to the MSYA for assistance with recruitment;

By the end of January 2020, the Ministry of Education will conduct a survey for government and government-assisted primary and secondary schools regarding existing coaching personnel and student participation in sports. Every effort will be made to relay the outcomes from the survey to the Ministry of Sport and Youth Affairs for assistance with recruitment of coaches during the second quarter of 2020.

G. That the MoE, in collaboration with the NPTA, NSDSL and MoH, increase its efforts to facilitate parental education sessions on healthy lifestyles and obesity prevention/treatment. The MoE can consider mandating principals to organise a minimum number of sessions for parents per academic term;

MoE continues to collaborate with school PTAs /stakeholders in promoting education sessions on healthy lifestyles. In January 2020, Principals will be mandated by a Circular Memorandum to invite personnel from Student Support Services Division and NSDSL to include parental education sessions on healthy lifestyles and obesity prevention/treatment in PTA meetings.

H. That the MoE increase its use of social media in existing and future wellness initiatives to disseminate health and nutrition information to parents and children;

In keeping with modern methods for information dissemination, the MoE continues to maintain an active Facebook page and website. In this regard, the MoE will increase the use of its social media platforms which can be easily accessed by targeted stakeholders. In addition, we propose to heighten our collaborations with stakeholders who specialise in developing and disseminating health-related information for parents and children which will be circulated through social media.

I. That as a complementary initiative to existing efforts, including the National Healthy Lifestyle Reader and Quiz, the MoE refer parents to existing digital resources such as mobile Apps that can assist them in preparing healthier meals for their children;

The MoE will utilise this initiative as a part of sensitising parents in parenting programmes conducted by the Student Support Services Division of the MoE and NSDSL. The MoE will also work with the CPDD and ICTD to research existing mobile Apps that provide the relevant information for parents.

J. That the MoE, MoH and NSDSL seek to develop a standard, well-defined evaluation system for health and wellness campaigns, so that the following information is systematically recorded:

- i. The estimated number of participants at each event; and**
- ii. Feedback from participants' post-intervention (which can be collected through short surveys) on the perceived usefulness of the event and suggestions for enhancing future initiatives.**

The MoE notes this recommendation and will liaise with the various stakeholders to strengthen the evaluation methods for school sessions and where pre- and post-tests can be administered to students when such sessions are conducted.

Objective 3: To examine the effectiveness of the School Nutrition Programme in the reduction of childhood obesity.

RECOMMENDATIONS (pgs. 58-61)

- A. That by March 2020, the MoE and NSDSL conduct an evaluation of existing SNP menu options to determine the extent to which they satisfy the special dietary needs of diabetic students and obese students;**

The NSDSL menus are designed to offer students nutritious and balanced meals, that provide, as a weekly average, $\frac{1}{4}$ of the Recommended Dietary Allowance (RDA) of nutrients for breakfast and $\frac{1}{3}$ of the Recommended Dietary Allowance (RDA) of nutrients for lunch respectively.

Efforts are ongoing to reduce the level of free sugars, salt and fat found in school meals, all of which may contribute to the development of nutrition-related non-communicable diseases (NCDs) like Type 2 Diabetes. For example, since September 2017, the NSDSL no longer serves drinks with added sugar, thereby complying with the MoE & MoH policy of banning the sale or offer of sugar-sweetened beverages on the school compound.

Students who are diabetic or obese must be under the care of a doctor, who should refer them to a Dietitian/Nutritionist. The nutrition professional will then complete an individualised meal plan for them. It will therefore be difficult for the Programme to cater specifically for the needs of such students, who may have underlying medical complications that require specialised dietary considerations. Furthermore, having a meal service which includes singling out such students, can cause them to be stigmatised among the school population, which can impact negatively on their well-being.

- B. That as part of the MoE's response to this Committee, the Ministry should indicate:**
- i. The total number of diabetic students who are recipients of the SNP, from information collected on the SNP application forms; and**
 - ii. A description of how SNP meals are adapted to meet the special dietary needs of diabetic students and obese students.**

- i. The School Supervision and Management Division is still in the process of reconciling data from Education Districts for the last Academic Year 2018/2019 on the number of diabetic students.
- ii. Please see the above response provided at Recommendation A.

C. If SNP meals do not cater specifically to the dietary needs of obese students, the MoE should consider:

- i. Determining the total number of obese students who are recipients of the SNP;**
- ii. Examining the feasibility of creating specialised menus for this group of students;
and**
- iii. Calculating the estimated cost of catering meals specific to this group of students.
This exercise should be completed before the beginning of the second school term in the academic year 2019/2020;**

The MoE does not have the resources to scientifically determine the number of obese students who may be recipients of the SNP meals. However, nutritionally balanced meals, are made available to all students who are recipients of the SNP.

D. That the MoE implement strategies to encourage the consumption of vegetables and traditional meals in the SNP menus. Consideration can be given to the use of peer advocates, social incentives and school campaigns to promote good eating habits. These strategies may be incorporated as part of the School Nutrition Education Programme and HFLE curriculum;

The MoE notes this recommendation and has already distributed posters to primary schools on good eating habits which is part of the Eating and Fitness for the Academic Year 2019/2020. The NSDSL continues to encourage the consumption of vegetables and traditional meals through its nutrition education initiatives.

E. That in an effort to reduce food wastage, the MoE and NSDSEC consider the introduction of a Register. It is recommended that each SNP recipient be required to sign the Register upon receipt of their meals. A measure can be introduced whereby students' repeated abstention from accepting SNP meals can result in their temporary or permanent removal from the list of recipients, further to a review by the school's administration.

The MoE notes this recommendation, however, students who are SNP recipients are selected by the Principal based on the criteria set by the NSDSL and is monitored by the school administration. The food wastage often occurs after the students receive the meal e.g. they throw away the meal after consumption. Schools have been requested to monitor consumption of meals to reduce wastage.

F. That the MoE give consideration to partnering with the MoH to implement a pilot study in which a sample of obese SNP recipients and their families are monitored over time to examine how receipt of school meals impacts students':

- i. Food preferences and attitudes;**
- ii. Nutrition intake; and**
- iii. BMI;**

The outcomes of this initiative are likely to align with the Management and Control objective of the CARPHA Plan of Action for Healthy Weights which aims to, "provide children and families who are affected by overweight/obesity with the necessary care and support," and the Strategic Information objective which aims to, "provide core data for tracking the movement and determinant of the epidemic."

The MoE notes this recommendation and recommends that this study should be outsourced to an external agency. Such an initiative should be led by MoH and will be supported by MoE.

G. That the NSDSL continue its ongoing monitoring of the nutritional value of SNP meals to ensure that recipients are provided with the required dietary allowances. Particularly focus should be given to the adequate provision of fruit and vegetables and restricted amounts of sweetened, processed, pre-packaged foods;

The MoE is satisfied with the initiatives currently undertaken by the NSDSL.

H. That in its response to the Committee, the MoE provide an update on the status of:

i. the Steering Committee of the NSDSEC,

The Steering Committee of the NSDSEC has been formalised and meets once per term to address the recommendations outlined in the Cabinet Minute dated November 16th, 2018. The Steering Committee comprises representatives of the under-mentioned Ministry/Agency/Associations:

- The Ministry of Education
 - Chief Education Officer
 - Director, Educational Planning Division
 - Director, School Supervision and Management Division;
- The NSDSL, led by the Chief Executive Officer;
- The Association of Principals of Public Secondary Schools;
- The National Primary Schools Principals' Association; and
- The Trinidad and Tobago Unified Teachers' Association

The Committee is currently reviewing the measures approved by Cabinet to reduce wastage and improve efficiency of the programme.

ii. the recommendations of the NSDSL Evaluation Committee regarding the alignment of the School Nutrition Education Programme with the HFLE curriculum; and

Currently the HFLE curriculum is being reviewed to ensure alignment with the recently revised CARICOM Regional HFLE Framework. As part of this process discussions have already taken place between the MoE and the NSDSL with regard to alignment with the School Nutrition Programme.

iii. a copy of the Ministry's work plan for 2019 related to proposed anti-obesity initiatives for fiscal 2019/2020.

For Fiscal 2019/2020, the Ministry's Work Plan includes initiatives that target anti-obesity in the *Building Young Persons' Resilience through Life Skills* and the implementation of the *Health-Promoting Schools* programmes.