



17th Report

JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE ON

SOCIAL SERVICES

AND

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

On An

**Inquiry into the Ministry of Education's strategies for
ensuring continuity in the delivery of education
amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic**

FIFTH SESSION (2019/2020) 11TH PARLIAMENT
OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

17th REPORT

OF THE

**JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC
ADMINISTRATION**

ON AN

**INQUIRY INTO THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION'S STRATEGIES FOR
ENSURING CONTINUITY IN THE DELIVERY OF EDUCATION AMIDST
THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

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The Joint Select Committee on Social Services and Public Administration

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THE COMMITTEE



Mr. Paul Richards
CHAIRMAN



Mr. Esmond Forde, MP
VICE-CHAIRMAN



Mrs. Glenda Jennings-Smith, MP
MEMBER



Brig. Gen. (Ret.) Ancil Antoine, MP
MEMBER



Mrs. Christine Newallo-Hosein, MP
MEMBER



Mr. Rohan Sinanan
MEMBER



Ms. Khadijah Ameen
MEMBER



Ms. Allyson West
MEMBER

Committee Mandate and Establishment

- 1.1.1 Section 66 of the Constitution of Trinidad and Tobago declares, that not later than three months after the first meeting of the House of Representatives, the Parliament shall appoint Joint Select Committees to inquire into and report to both Houses in respect of Government Ministries, Municipal Corporations, Statutory Authorities, State Enterprises and Service Commissions, in relation to their administration, the manner of exercise of their powers, their methods of functioning and any criteria adopted by them in the exercise of their powers and functions.
- 1.1.2 Motions related to this purpose were passed in the House of Representatives and Senate on November 13 and 17, 2015, respectively and thereby established, *inter alia*, the ***Joint Select Committee on Social Services and Public Administration***.
- 1.1.3 Standing Order 91 of the Senate and 101 of the House of Representatives outline the general functions of a Committee of this nature. They are as follows:
- a) “To examine Bills and review all legislation relating to the relevant Ministries, departments or bodies or as may be referred to it by the House;
 - b) To investigate, inquire into, and report on all matters relating to the mandate, management, activities, administration and operations of the assigned Ministries, departments or bodies;
 - c) To study the programme and policy objectives of Ministries, departments or bodies and the effectiveness of the implementation of such programmes and policy objectives;
 - d) To assess and monitor the performance of Ministries, Departments and bodies and the manner of the exercise of their powers;
 - e) To investigate and inquire into all matters relating to the assigned Ministries, Departments and bodies as they may deem necessary, or as may be referred to them by the House or a Minister; and
 - f) To make reports and recommendations to the House as often as possible, including recommendations for proposed legislation.”

Powers of the Joint Select Committee

1.1.4 Standing Orders 101 of the Senate and 111 of the House of Representatives outline the core powers of the Committee which include *inter alia*:

- to send for persons, papers and records;
- to sit notwithstanding any adjournment of the Senate;
- to adjourn from place to place;
- to report from time to time;
- to appoint specialist advisers either to supply information which is not otherwise readily available or to elucidate matters of complexity within the Committee's or Sub-Committee's order of reference;
- to communicate with any Committee of Parliament on matters of common interest; and
- to meet concurrently with any other Committee for the purpose of deliberating, taking evidence or considering draft reports.

Membership

1.1.5 The Committee comprises the following members:

- | | |
|--|---------------|
| 1. Mr. Paul Richards | Chairman |
| 2. Mr. Esmond Forde, MP | Vice-Chairman |
| 3. Mrs. Glenda Jennings-Smith, MP | Member |
| 4. Brig. Gen. (Ret.) Ancil Antoine, MP | Member |
| 5. Mrs. Christine Newallo-Hosein, MP | Member |
| 6. Mr. Rohan Sinanan | Member |
| 7. Ms. Khadijah Ameen | Member |
| 8. Ms. Allyson West | Member |

Secretariat Support

1.1.6 The following officers were assigned to assist the Committee:

- | | | |
|-------------------------------|---|-----------------------------|
| 1. Mr. Julien Ogilvie | - | Secretary |
| 2. Mr. Johnson Greenidge | - | Assistant Secretary |
| 3. Ms. Aaneesa Baksh | - | Graduate Research Assistant |
| 4. Ms. Nicole Brown | - | Parliamentary Intern |
| 5. Ms. Lucinda Leston-Raymond | - | Administrative Professional |

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ABBREVIATIONS

APPSST&T	Association of Principals of Public Secondary Schools of Trinidad and Tobago
ASJA	Anjuman Sunnat ul Jammat Association
CAPSS	Caribbean Association of Principals of Secondary Schools
CEMB	Catholic Education Board
DRETCHI	Trinidad and Tobago Association for the Hearing Impaired
DSFN	Down's Syndrome Family Network
ECCE	Early Childhood Care Education
EMIS	Education Management Information System
IA	Internal Assessment
MERS	Middle East Respiratory Syndrome
MoE	Ministry of Education
MSDFS	Ministry of Social Development and Family Service
NAPSPA	National Primary Schools Principals' Association
PPSBE	Presbyterian Primary Schools' Board of Education
PSSBE	Presbyterian Secondary Schools' Board of Education
SARS	Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome
SATT	Support Autism Trinidad and Tobago
SBA	School Based Assessment
SLMS	School Learning Management System
TTAHI	Trinidad and Tobago Association for the Hearing Impaired
TTUTA	Trinidad and Tobago Unified Teacher's Association

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 On May 15, 2020, the Committee resolved to inquire into the Ministry of Education's strategies for ensuring continuity in the delivery of education amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic. The Committee agreed on the following inquiry objectives:

1. **To examine the gaps in the continuity measures of the MOE during the COVID-19 pandemic;**
2. **To determine the level of accessibility of electronic distance learning initiatives to poor and marginalised students of ECCE, primary and secondary schools during the COVID-19 pandemic;**
3. **To assess the MOE's support interventions for low achievers and special needs ECCE, primary and secondary school students; and**
4. **To examine teachers' response and teacher support systems during the COVID-19 pandemic.**

1.2 The Committee acquired both oral and written evidence based on the objectives listed above. Oral evidence was received during two (2) virtual public hearings held with various stakeholders (*See Appendix I*) on May 22, 2020 and June 05, 2020. Some of the significant issues highlighted during the inquiry were:

- i. There have been no formal discussions between the MoE and the stakeholders on the protocols for the re-opening of schools and the way forward for incorporating online and distance learning into the education sector;
- ii. An arrangement which mandates teachers to deliver online teaching activities would require a renegotiation of the terms and conditions of service for teachers between the recognised Union, the Chief Personnel Officer, and other stakeholders to determine the protocols, legal obligations and implications;
- iii. There must be a transitional period for the provision of resources and training to occur before the comprehensive fusion of online learning and conventional teaching;
- iv. The School Learning Management System (SLMS) is an innovative median for learning. However, its introduction was expedited due to the urgent need for an alternative means of delivering education. Therefore, further modifications will be required to optimise its user benefits;

- v. In an attempt to be proactive, some Principals of schools have commenced the preparation of schools for examinations based on general social distancing and sanitisation guidelines. However, as at June 05, 2020, the Ministry of Education had not documented and/or published standardised guidelines;
- vi. The major barriers that are hindering teachers and students from participating in online learning and teaching is the lack of access to the internet and the required electronic devices (laptops, desk tops);
- vii. There was evidence that suggested that some teachers implemented various initiatives to engage students and enable distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic;
- viii. Some teachers focused on the pastoral care of the student rather than the online/distance learning classes as in some communities the pastoral care was the priority for students and their families.
- ix. The MoE, NGOs and other stakeholder's enacted distance learning initiatives in order to circumvent the accessibility issues of students during the COVID-19 period;
- x. The Support Autism Trinidad and Tobago (SATT) and Down Syndrome Family Network (DSFN) have received no communication from the SSSD except for the initial contact with some members of the organizations during the SSSD's data collection exercise;
- xi. The MoE has commenced initiatives to allow for students to receive psycho-social support and relieve anxieties during the COVID-19 outbreak and for impending examinations;
- xii. Special needs students in both public and private schools have not been able to continue learning due to financial and learning challenges;
- xiii. The inability of the MoE's SLMS to effectively stimulate learning and provide learning activities for special need students;
- xiv. HSE guidelines and school re-opening protocols need to be more accessible for students with special needs;
- xv. No standardized work done by teachers during the COVID-19 period as each teacher focused on different topics. Only the teachers of students in examination classes continued with curriculum teaching;

- xvi. Teaching during the COVID-19 measures were considered voluntary since schools were closed.
 - xvii. Many teachers did not conduct online teaching or learning classes consistently or at all nor did teachers provide formal reporting on the online teaching;
- 1.3 Based on these findings and other matters which arose during the inquiry, the Committee has proffered recommendations which it believes will address the issues highlighted. A summary of these recommendations follows this Executive Summary; and
- 1.4 The Committee looks forward to reviewing the Minister's response to this Report, which becomes due, sixty (60) days after it is presented to the Houses of Parliament.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

- A. There is a need for the MoE to host urgent consultations with all stakeholders to discuss the following:
- i. Challenges faced by schools in relation to preparing for examinations and the reopening of schools;
 - ii. Funding for the COVID-19 measures within schools;
 - iii. The way forward for education with respect to online and distance learning;
 - iv. Drafting and implementation of Guidelines/Protocols for the reopening of schools;
- B. The MoE upgrade the user interface of the SLMS for it to become more user-friendly as well as integrate the ability for principals to monitor the work of teachers while on the SLMS platform;
- C. The MoE incorporate the following recommendations of the Trinidad and Tobago Blind Welfare Association and the Trinidad and Tobago Association for the Hearing Impaired (DRETCHI) to upgrade the user interface of the SLMS for special needs students:
- i. additional videos to help special needs children understand the work being done online;
 - ii. smart Boards and multiple types of visual aids in the online platforms;
 - iii. access should be given to assistant Interpreters to communicate and help the deaf and hard-of-hearing children with their school work;
 - iv. allow for activities uploaded on the platform to be read by computer screen readers; and
 - v. training for teachers delivering video content to ensure that when teaching, everything is described audibly.
- D. MoE should also seek the support of mental health professionals in the private sector to provide assistance with this initiative on a voluntary basis.
- E. The MoE consider incorporating aspects of the APPSST&T's draft online policy for teaching and learning (Appendix VII) in the MoE's National Policy for Teaching and Learning Online.

- F. There is a need to provide a period of “catching up” for students who have fallen behind or had a break in their education before proceeding with the next stages of the syllabi.
- G. That the MoE consider the opinion of the PSSBE and the ASJA Board of Education that each school has an HSE officer assigned for the duration of the examination period within schools.
- H. The MoE circulate standardized HSE guidelines for the preparation of schools for the re-opening of schools and conduct of examinations.
- I. A comprehensive review/assessment of the MoE’s response to this unexpected public health emergency must be executed as a means of determining successes, failures and lessons learned to informed future responses to similar emergencies.
- J. That the MoE collaborate with the MoSDFS to establish standardized/documented criteria to assist with selecting students/families for food support initiatives.
- K. The MoE should consider the proposal of the NAPSPA in Appendix VIII in adopting a dedicated multi-media approach to the provision of distance learning classroom for students.
- L. The MoE in collaboration with the relevant stakeholders should undertake additional studies on the ‘digital divide’ and internet penetration rate among junior primary and junior secondary students (forms 1 to 3) as a means of developing its data bank to guide and inform future policy decisions.
- M. That consideration be given to prioritising the distribution of laptops to standard 5 teachers and students who are expected to resume classes from July 20, 2020 until the date of SEA examinations. In this regard, a method of assessing eligibility should be developed.
- N. That a feasibility study be conducted on a proposed schools broadcasting network which may comprised a dedicated free-to-air television channel and a radio frequency. This initiative will be aimed at benefiting the marginalized student who may be unable to access the internet or an appropriate electronic device. However, the committee

acknowledges that such an intervention may add limited value to special needs students.

- O. Given that special needs students were significantly disadvantaged during this period of public health emergency, the MoE should give consideration to the following:
- P. Holding consultations with organisations, parents and teachers who support children with special needs to determine appropriate responses and interventions strategies that can be implemented during situations which require schools to be prematurely closed.
- Q. In furtherance of the recommendation above, the MoE should collaborate with the NPTA and organisations representing children with special needs to explore options/avenues for providing basic training in teaching/learning techniques to parents/guardians of students with special needs. For example, the teaching of sign language classes to parents online as a means of empowering them to assist their children in a more effective manner.
- R. That the MOE adopt an equal access to information policy that will guide the Ministry's approach to disseminating information to stakeholders in a consistent, fair and accurate manner.
- S. It is imperative that the MoE collaborate with the Chief Personnel Officer, TTUTA, the Teaching Service Commission and any other relevant stakeholders to determine the legal obligations and implications of incorporating online teaching and learning in the terms and conditions of employment of teachers.
- T. The introduction of appropriate mechanisms in the MoE's online learning platforms to monitor the usage/output of teaching staff (and by extension students and other users)
- U. That the MoE collaborate with TTUTA to provide training to teachers (on a needs basis) in the use of online teaching and learning platforms.

INTRODUCTION

Background

- 1.1 Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses which may cause illness in animals or humans. COVID-19 is a new disease, distinct from other diseases caused by coronaviruses, such as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS). This new virus and disease were unknown before the outbreak began in Wuhan, China, in December 2019.¹
- 1.2 On March 12, 2020, the Minister of Health for Trinidad and Tobago announced the first case of COVID-19 in Trinidad and Tobago. On March 17, 2020, restrictions were imposed by the Government to prohibit all travel into the country for all non-nationals and subsequently on March 23, 2020 Trinidad and Tobago closed its borders. Since then the Government of Trinidad and Tobago has instated several measures to prevent and reduce the spread of the virus throughout the country. As at May 9, 2020 the Government of Trinidad and Tobago highlighted the country's plan to begin a six phased approach to the re-opening of the country's economy.
- 1.3 In response to the Pandemic and in keeping with WHPO recommendations, the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago imposed stay-at-home measures on a national level on March 30, 2020. Consequently, all schools including tertiary level institutions were closed with effect from March 16, 2020.

Impact of COVID-19 on Education

- 1.4 The closure of schools has significantly disrupted the delivery of education and has had major implications for student, teachers, parents and associated stakeholders. Some of the issues for consideration included:
 1. Measures to ensure continuity in education during COVID-19 pandemic
 2. The impact of the 'Digital Divide' on poor and marginalised students thus preventing access to distance learning arrangements;

¹ WHO, "Q&A on coronaviruses (COVID-19)," <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/question-and-answers-hub/q-a-detail/q-a-coronaviruses>

3. Support for low Achievers who generally require special and individualized educational interventions;
 4. Support for students with special needs (psycho/social disorders); and
 5. The managing the performance of teachers during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 1.5 On April 14, 2020 the Minister of Education held a Press Conference detailing the way forward for the educational sector during the COVID-19. The Minister highlighted the following initiatives:
- a. Online platforms of the MOE; Education Management Information System (EMIS), School Learning Management System (SLMS), aimed at facilitating distance learning for students and teachers and virtual classroom for students;
 - b. Teachers provide online content for ECCE, primary and secondary school students;
 - c. Partner with private sector and other government agencies to source electronic devices for children who are unable to access them;
 - d. Guide for parents to provide classes to students at home; and
 - e. Collaboration with the MPA and Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago allow internet connectivity availability to all students who do not have access to internet services at home and provide free accessibility to all users of the MOE SLMS Platform.
- 1.6 As at April 14, 2020 the Minister in the Ministry of Education indicated that approximately 60,000 students did not have access to technological devices to utilize the systems available from the MOE. The Minister of Education indicated that the MOE intends to partner with other Government agencies and partner with persons within the private sector to source devices for students who do not have access. Additionally, teachers who do not have the necessary devices will be able to utilize the laptops available from their respective schools for their virtual classes. The Minister further indicated that with regard to special needs students;
- 3 schools in each educational district will be identified to treat with special needs students;
 - Teachers will be trained and retrained to deal with special needs students; and
 - The teachers will also liaise with parents to receive their support when teaching the special needs students.

1.7 During the sitting of the House of Representatives on April 27, 2020, the Minister of Education indicated that the MOE's online learning management system provides support for visual disabilities in the following areas:

- Customizable visual settings (font sizes, contrast images);
- Closed captions and transcripts for all videos;
- All content/images can be read aloud; and
- Fully integrated with Moodle.

Conduct of the Inquiry

1.8. Prior to the commencement of the virtual public hearings, the Committee issued invitations to specific stakeholders and requested written submissions based on the following objectives:

1. **To examine the gaps in the continuity measures of the MOE during the COVID-19 pandemic;**
2. **To determine the level of accessibility of electronic distance learning initiatives to poor and marginalised students of ECCE, primary and secondary schools during the COVID-19 pandemic;**
3. **To assess the MOE's support interventions for low achievers and special needs ECCE, primary and secondary school students; and**
4. **To examine teachers' response and teacher support systems during the COVID-19 pandemic.**

1.9. Evidence gathering for this inquiry included two (2) virtual public hearings held with the following governmental and non-government stakeholders on:

1. Friday, May 22 2020

- a. Trinidad and Tobago Unified Teachers Association (TTUTA); and
- b. Ministry of Education;

2. Friday June 05, 2020

- a. National Primary Schools Principals' Association (NAPSPA);

- b. Association of Principals of Public Secondary Schools of Trinidad and Tobago (APPSST&T);
 - c. Presbyterian Primary Schools' Board of Education (PPSBE);
 - d. Presbyterian Secondary Schools' Board of Education (PSSBE);
 - e. ASJA Board of Education;
 - f. Catholic Education Board (CEMB);
 - g. Support Autism Trinidad and Tobago (SATT); and
 - h. Down Syndrome Family Network (DSFN).
- 1.10. Subsequent to these public hearings additional information was requested from specific stakeholders and was submitted accordingly.
- 1.11. Oral and written submissions received from the entities appearing before the Committee provided a frame of reference for the Committee's deliberations on the subject inquiry.
- 1.12. The **Minutes of the Meetings** during which the public hearings were held are attached as **Appendix II and III** and the **Verbatim Notes** as **Appendix IV and V**.

ISSUES, FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

OBJECTIVE 1: TO EXAMINE THE GAPS IN THE CONTINUITY MEASURES OF THE MOE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC.

ISSUES

MOE's initiatives to respond to the needs of teachers and students

- 3.1. The Ministry of Education (MoE) submitted that it has developed the following initiatives to facilitate the continuity in the delivery of education during the pandemic:
 - a) A framework for the Reopening of Educational Institutions with timeline and associated activities for the period May 2020 – July 2021 has been developed and is currently before the Cabinet for approval;
 - b) Divisions of the MoE are developing detailed and focused strategies for the implementation of these activities;
 - c) The MoE has also drafted policies to be submitted to Cabinet after completion including:
 - National Policy for upload and creation of student material;
 - National Policy for Teaching and Learning Online; and
 - National Policy on Intellectual Property and Copyright.
- 3.2. The MoE has been in contact with the Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago (TATT) and some Internet Service providers to allow for students to access their servers free of charge. Further, the MoE will be receiving devices for students from the private sector and NGOs including UNICEF but will also submit a Note to Cabinet to request additional devices for the 68,000 students who are in need.
- 3.3. The MoE's submission indicated that regarding children's learning and development at the ECCE level, parents are provided with weekly activities, ideas and tips that stimulate fun ways that give their children the opportunity for learning at home, using simple materials which can be sourced at home.

Initiatives to incorporate distance learning in classrooms

- 3.4. The ASJA Board of Education highlighted that while there is nothing that can replace the physical presence of a teacher within a classroom, distance learning can begin immediately once all teachers and students are able to access a device. Additionally, the ASJA Board of Education, suggested that teachers conduct their online classes from the schools and utilise the school's resources rather than their own resources.
- 3.5. The Catholic Education Board of Management (CEBM) highlighted that distance learning encompasses more than online teaching and learning and there are other forms of distance learning.

Challenges encountered by teachers and students in using the MoE's SLMS

- 3.6. The Association of Principals of Public Secondary Schools of Trinidad and Tobago (APPSST&T) highlighted that while the SLMS has the potential to be an excellent initiative, the SLMS does not have a user-friendly interface; access to LMS is multi-layered and unfriendly and it can be overwhelming since the uploaded information is sometimes voluminous and not presented in a manner that complements the syllabi objectives. As such, these 'shortcomings' have deterred practitioners from fully harnessing the benefits of the platform.
- 3.7. Further, teachers and principals are successfully engaging students via a host of other on-line platforms including ZOOM, Microsoft Classroom, WhatsApp, e-mail, Edmodo, and others. However, it was suggested that teachers have invested much time into learning about the foregoing internet platforms and therefore switching to SLMS would be met with some resistance especially since the SLMS is still afflicted with many issues.
- 3.8. National Primary Schools Principals' Association (NAPSPA) indicated that with the exception of newly appointed teachers and those engaged in training via teaching degree programs, mainstream primary level educators had limited exposure to the SLMS platform before the advent of Covid-19.

- 3.9. Stakeholders also appealed for the establishment of protocols and guidelines for teachers, student and parents to inform the use of these online learning/teaching platforms.
- 3.10. Prior to the Covid-19 crisis, the Ministry's IT resources were focused on operationalising the Education Management Information Services (EMIS), which was launched in 2019. The Learning Management System (LMS) was at the testing phase. However, due to the COVID-19 crisis, the implementation of the system was fast-tracked. As such, there was limited time to train teachers and technicians to use the system. The Ministry has since been reviewing the components of the LMS with a view to enhancing its efficiency.
- 3.11. The Ministry admitted that there were significant limitations with the SLMS platform, with reference to the execution of pedagogy for students requiring a greater degree of individualised support and guided assistance to be able to follow complex instructions and engage with difficult content.
- 3.12. The Trinidad and Tobago Association for the Hearing Impaired (DRETCHI) in their submission highlighted that the configuration SLMS system was of limited benefit to deaf or hard-of-hearing children. In particular, the association cited the need for interpreters to be available and engaged to assist these children in utilising the system.

Examinations: CSEC, CAPE and SEA

- 3.13. During the MOE's Media Conference on May 28, 2020, the Minister announced that CSEC and CAPE examinations will commence by July 13, 2020. At a subsequent briefing held on June 10, 2020, the country was informed that SEA will be held on August 20, 2020 and Standard 5 students and teachers will be allowed to return to school to prepare for examinations from July 20, 2020.
- 3.14. It was noted that the format of the CSEC and CAPE examinations will comprise the multiple-choice exams and School Based Assessments (SBAs) or Internal Assessments (IA). The subjects without SBAs or IAs will have a Paper 2 written examination.

- 3.15. During the virtual public hearing held on May 22, 2020, the Committee was informed by TTUTA, that SBAs for students in some schools have been completed while others were delayed due to the following challenges:
- a) The need for face-to-face communication for some subjects e.g. Physics, Pure Math;
 - b) The lack of required resources to print and assess scripts/submissions e.g. Technical Drawing;
 - c) Industrial environment needed for the completion of some Caribbean Vocation Qualifications (CVQs) e.g. furniture making. The CXC's CVQ central office located in Jamaica is currently closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic; and
 - d) Assessing Performing Arts subjects may require the use of school facilities.
- 3.16. The Catholic Education Board of Management (CEBM) indicated that most SBAs for the students of schools under their remit were completed. However, the Internal Assessments (IA) for CAPE, which require practical assessments, have been stymied.
- 3.17. Given the unprecedented circumstances, education stakeholders agreed that students seeking enrolment at the University of the West Indies (UWI), will be assessed based on their CAPE Unit 1 scores/grades obtained in Lower Six, rather than their CAPE Unit 2 results for 2020 as these would not be released in time for matriculation purposes.
- 3.18. The APPSST&T had no issues with the decision to utilise the CAPE Unit One marks for the matriculation into the University of the West Indies as it should provide a good indication of the students' academic capabilities.

Health and Safety Preparation for Examinations

- 3.19. In its submission dated May 21, 2020, the MoE indicated that it had formulated a plan to manage social distance during the examinations which will include the following:
- a) All visitors must wear masks. (No mask, no entry);
 - b) Masks must always be worn whilst on the compound;
 - c) Visitors must observe the visible markers for social distancing placed at the school entrance and maintain social distancing whilst on the compound;

- d) Markers for social distancing will be placed at entrances to washrooms, cafeteria and any area where students may be asked to assemble;
- e) Student desks will be placed 6 feet apart;
- f) A Seating Plan will be displayed in each room;
- g) Markers depicting social distance will be placed outside the Exam room. Students must observe these as they prepare to enter the room;
- h) An exit strategy at the end of exam that ensures compliance with social distancing will be implemented. This applies to exit from the room used as the Exam Centre as well as from the school compound;
- i) Any student who displays flu-like symptoms (including allergies) must provide medical clearance before being allowed into the Examination room;
- j) All students will be questioned on their medical history and their family's medical history during the two weeks period prior to the date of the CSEC exams;
- k) Additional invigilators will be employed to ensure adequate supervision in what is anticipated to be a larger layout.

3.20. The MoE liaised with the Ministry of Health regarding Health and Safety guidelines that need to be implemented within schools to proceed with exams. The MoE also engaged principals on protocols for entering school compounds, sanitisation of schools and the provision of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and cleaning supplies to schools.

3.21. The PSSBE and the ASJA Board of Education indicated that there are Health and Safety Environment (HSE) concerns which need to be addressed at their schools prior to the reopening of schools for the CAPE and CSEC examinations and completion of School-Based Assessments (SBAs) and suggest that all schools have a safety officer assigned for the duration of the examinations. As at June 5 2020, the majority of stakeholders in attendance at the virtual public hearing indicated that no official guidelines or equipment were received from the MoE for the preparation of schools for the examinations.

3.22. However, at the said hearing the President of the APPSST&T submitted that the MoE had commenced a scheduled distribution of cleaning supplies to schools by education district. The APPSST&T indicated that schools have received brief and general guidelines from the

Chief Medical Officer (CMO) and the MoE on the preparation of schools for the examinations. Schools were subsequently asked to submit to the MoE a list of necessary equipment for complying with the H&S guidelines.

Food Support Cards for Students

- 3.23. During the virtual public hearing held on June 05, 2020, the Committee was informed that principals of schools reported that the process for the distribution of food support cards to students was confusing as various organising bodies/authorities provided conflicting instructions and information.
- 3.24. According to the stakeholders, initially the MoE instructed Principals to submit all the names of students who received meals at school and not only those most in need. The MOE subsequently revised the instruction and requested that Principals prioritise the neediest students. However, it appeared that some principals were not apprised of the new directive. Consequently, many of the students registered for the school feeding programme and who were eligible for the food support card were unable to access relief.
- 3.25. Additionally, there were no criteria established to aide Principals in prioritising the students who should receive food support and as such Principals admitted that it was a challenge to select 'deserving' homes when the circumstances of parents were changing and unknown to the Principals.
- 3.26. The matter was further compounded by the outdated state of feeding programme lists in many schools. This exacerbated the inability of principals to accurately determine which students were to be selected.
- 3.27. Stakeholders indicated that in instances where the students in need were unable to access the food support services, the schools, teachers and the business community assisted by providing hampers and food support to the students and their families.

FINDINGS

- i. The Covid-19 pandemic required the MoE to introduce/implemented emergency response measures in an attempt to sustain the delivery of education and other related services. It was clear and commendable that the officials worked assiduously to ensure that some elements of the system were still accessible. However, several challenges and shortcoming emerged during the transition from face-to-face to online learning (as would be expected). It was observed that the formulation and dissemination of policies, protocols and guidelines were still pending given the sudden advent of the pandemic.
- ii. User challenges with the SLMS have deterred teachers and students from fully harnessing the potential of the online platforms. However, an equally significant issue was the lack of internet access and appropriate electronic devices among the student and teacher populations.
- iii. There must be a transitional period for the provision of resources and training before the blending of online learning and conventional teaching can occur.
- iv. At the time of the Committee's hearings, stakeholder consultations on the way forward to facilitate the safe return to school by teachers and students were pending. In the interim, principals of schools have commenced the preparation of schools for examinations based on general social distancing and sanitisation measures. However, the Committee noted that the MoE's efforts in this regard will be supported by the Ministry of Health.
- v. The initial proposed strategy for the distribution of cleaning supplies by school districts was deemed as ineffective and potentially cumbersome by some stakeholders, since the insane instances in which some schools are expected to receive the supplies was after the established timeframe for the completion of SBAs.
- vi. It was evident that a large segment of the student population who are eligible for food support was unable to access same due in part to the miscommunication among key stakeholders.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- A. There is a need for the MoE to host urgent consultations with all stakeholders to discuss the following:
- i. Challenges faced by schools in relation to preparing for examinations and the reopening of schools;
 - ii. Funding for the COVID-19 measures within schools;
 - iii. The way forward for education with respect to online and distance learning;
 - iv. Drafting and implementation of Guidelines/Protocols for the reopening of schools;
- B. The MoE upgrade the user interface of the SLMS for it to become more user-friendly as well as integrate the ability for principals to monitor the work of teachers while on the SLMS platform;
- C. The MoE incorporate the following recommendations of the Trinidad and Tobago Blind Welfare Association and the Trinidad and Tobago Association for the Hearing Impaired (DRETCHI) to upgrade the user interface of the SLMS for special needs students:
- i. additional videos to help special needs children understand the work being done online;
 - ii. smart Boards and multiple types of visual aids in the online platforms;
 - iii. access should be given to assistant Interpreters to communicate and help the deaf and hard-of-hearing children with their school work;
 - iv. allow for activities uploaded on the platform to be read by computer screen readers; and
 - v. training for teachers delivering video content to ensure that when teaching, everything is described audibly.
- D. Given that the COVID-19 and the impending CSEC, CAPE and SEA examinations can cause increased anxieties and stress in students, an urgent outreach project should be launched to encourage students and parents to assess mental health support services via the Student Support Services Division. The MoE should also seek the support of mental health professionals in the private sector to provide assistance with this initiative on a voluntary basis.

- E. The MoE consider incorporating aspects of the APPSST&T's draft online policy for teaching and learning (Appendix VII) in the MoE's National Policy for Teaching and Learning Online.
- F. There is a need to provide a period of "catching up" for students who have fallen behind or had a break in their education before proceeding with the next stages of the syllabi.
- G. The MoE consider the opinion of the PSSBE and the ASJA Board of Education that each school has an HSE officer assigned for the duration of the examination period within schools.
- H. The MoE circulate standardized HSE guidelines for the preparation of schools for the re-opening of schools and conduct of examinations.
- I. A comprehensive review/assessment of the MoE's response to this unexpected public health emergency must be executed as a means of determining successes, failures and lessons learned to informed future responses to similar emergencies.
- J. That the MoE collaborate with the MoSDFS to establish standardized/documented criteria to assist with selecting students/families for food support initiatives.

OBJECTIVE 2: TO DETERMINE THE LEVEL OF ACCESSIBILITY OF ELECTRONIC DISTANCE LEARNING INITIATIVES TO POOR AND MARGINALISED STUDENTS OF ECCE, PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC;

ISSUES

The lack of devices and internet connectivity for teachers and students

- 3.28. The MoE's submission identified that as at May 21, 2020, approximately 68,000 students were in need of electronic devices and approximately 27,000 children were identified as in need of internet access. During the virtual public hearing held on May 22, 2020, the Ministry indicated that it intended to distribute by May 29, 2020, 5,800 laptops to teachers who indicated that they required a device to conduct online teaching. The laptops to be distributed to teachers were expected to be acquired from the 12,000 laptops which were procured and distributed to secondary schools in 2018.
- 3.29. The MOE collaborated with school principals to identify students in need of devices and internet connectivity. However, as at June 05, 2020, stakeholders were not aware of any further action initiated by the Ministry pursuant to that deliverable.
- 3.30. Denominations boards advised the committee that the deficit in electronic devices among their teaching staff was as follows:
- PPSBE 50%;
 - CEBM 25% (58 laptops distributed to teachers by the Board); and
 - ASJA Board of Education 25%.
- 3.31. During the virtual public hearing on May 22, 2020, TTUTA highlighted that approximately 5 percent of their teachers do not have access to devices.
- 3.32. The PPSBE recommended that consideration needs to be given to continuing online teaching /learning when schools reopen and going forward. For this to be successful, students and

teachers should be provided with the necessary resources such as devices and internet connectivity.

Initiatives of teachers to facilitate distance learning during the COVID-19 period

3.33. Based on the information provided by stakeholders, the Committee was informed that teachers' efforts to facilitate distance and online learning during the COVID-19 period included:

1. Conducting virtual classes and engaging students via various online and social media platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Classroom, Edmodo, email, Google classroom, WhatsApp, etc;
2. The mailing of revision assignments in print to students who are unable to access internet or device services
3. Distributed print material or left the materials at the school's guard booth for collection by parents to follow-up via telephone calls or in other creative ways; and
4. Phone calls to parents of students to assist students with assignments.

3.34. The Catholic Education Management Board (CEMB) organized volunteer teachers to develop lessons for print media (Catholic News) and for television production. The latter is aimed at class levels Infants through Standard four. The Minister of Education has provided access to TTT to air these lessons.

3.35. The MoE indicated in its submission that teachers were also asked to upload teaching plan for ECCE students onto the MoE's SLMS platform however, it was up to the parents of ECCE students to implement the teaching plan.

Initiatives of NGOs and MOE to solve accessibility issues of students

3.36. The Ministry of Education has utilised the following measures to solve accessibility issues of students:

- Zero rated access to the MoE's SLMS;
- Televised classes for SEA students. The MOE has started filming for infants to standard five (maths and English only). TTT will commence airing the additional material from the week starting May 25th, 2020; and
- Select radio stations will broadcast content during the month of June, 2020.

- 3.37. The MoE is seeking to assess the feasibility of incorporating Virtual Reality (VR) technology in the teaching of vocational and CVQ students using innovations such as VR labs. Members of the diaspora are being engaged to solicit support for this initiative.
- 3.38. During the virtual public hearing held on June 05, 2020, the NAPSPA highlighted that a proposal was submitted to the MoE for the Government to allow channels 4, 9, and 14 to broadcast scheduled classes for students from Infants to Standard 5 from Monday to Friday, 9am to 3pm. However, there has been no feedback from the MOE.
- 3.39. Additionally, the PPSBE concurs with the view of the NAPSPA that televised classes should be used to connect to a wider cross-section of the students as it is the less expensive option and many households are already in possession of a TV.
- 3.40. The submission of the CEBM indicated that through networking and with the assistance of stakeholders it was able to support students as follows:
- a. sourced and distributed devices to students who do not have internet connectivity;
 - b. donors provided students/parents with contributions to pay for data services. In the secondary schools;
 - c. past pupils have either supplied funds to purchase new devices or provided used devices to students.

FINDINGS

- i. Statistical data from the MOE and denominational Boards convincingly demonstrated that during the “stay at home” restrictions a significant percentage of students and teachers were unable to access or benefit from available online resources. However, the Committee also acknowledged that the digital divide that exist in Trinidad and Tobago does not only prohibit access to online learning but also marginalizes this segment of the population from accessing several other e-government and commercial services.

- ii. The MoE was expected to commence the distribution of laptops to teachers shortly after its meeting with the committee on May 22 2020. However, there has been no significant improvement in the situation for students who are in need of devices and internet connectivity.
- iii. The Committee is awaiting the MoE's official strategy for the distribution of the laptops to teachers and students given that the academic year is expected to officially end in the first week of July, 2020 (or thereabouts). The Committee expects that arrangements will be made to prioritise standard 5 teachers and students who are expected to resume classes from July 20, 2020 until the date of SEA examinations.
- iv. There was some evidence which suggested that teachers did attempt to continue teaching activities through the use of available technologies and improvised methods. However, it was difficult to determine the number of teachers who continued to teach during this period and the efficacy and impacts of lessons/assignments delivered. This ambiguity was further compounded by the fact that teachers were not obligated to work during this period.
- v. Free-to-air television and radio broadcast were recognized by the MoE and other stakeholders as practical medians for delivering educational content to a larger percentage of the student population.
- vi. The MoE, NGOs and other stakeholder's enacted distance learning initiatives in order to circumvent the accessibility issues of students during the COVID-19 period. However, it was gleaned that some denominational boards were better networked than others, therefore there was a disparity in the type of support rendered to schools under the purview of these Boards.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- A. The MoE should consider the proposal of the NAPSPA in Appendix VIII in adopting a dedicated multi-media approach to the provision of distance learning classroom for students.**
- B. The MoE in collaboration with the relevant stakeholders should undertake additional studies on the 'digital divide' and internet penetration rate among junior primary and**

junior secondary students (forms 1 to 3) as a means of developing its data bank to guide and inform future policy decisions.

- C. That consideration be given to prioritising the distribution of laptops to standard 5 teachers and students who are expected to resume classes from July 20, 2020 until the date of SEA examinations. In this regard, a method of assessing eligibility should be developed.

- D. That a feasibility study be conducted on a proposed schools broadcasting network which may comprised a dedicated free-to-air television channel and a radio frequency. This initiative will be aimed at benefiting the marginalized student who may be unable to access the internet or an appropriate electronic device. However, the committee acknowledges that such an intervention may add limited value to special needs students.

OBJECTIVE 3: TO ASSESS THE MOE'S SUPPORT INTERVENTIONS FOR LOW ACHIEVERS AND SPECIAL NEEDS ECCE, PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS;

ISSUES

The challenges of providing adequate support for special needs students

- 3.42. The Student Support Services Division (SSSD) of the Ministry is engaging with special needs students via the following media:
- LMS platform of the Ministry;
 - WhatsApp;
 - Zoom; and
 - Individual care packages via mail.
- 3.43. The SSSD's greatest challenge with regard to marginalized and special needs students is that there are students who are unable to maintain sustained interactions with teachers via online platforms.
- 3.44. According to the Down Syndrome Family Network (DSFN) the inequalities within the education system facing special needs students were exacerbated during the stay-at-home period. Many students were unable to engage in face-to-face interactions and other necessary treatments for their learning, such as speech therapy and physical therapy.
- 3.45. The Special Education Unit of the SSSD collected data in the various education districts on the access to learning and the needs of parents during the COVID-19 pandemic. This data was collected during the period March to May 20, 2020. A summary of the findings of the reports and the challenges of parents of special needs students is included in **Appendix VI**.
- 3.46. The Trinidad and Tobago Blind Welfare Association and the Trinidad and Tobago Association for the Hearing Impaired (DRETCHI) indicated that parents of students reported the following challenges as they attempted to support their children:
- i. no or limited internet access for one-on-one teaching sessions;
 - ii. poor or no telephone service;

- iii. lack of or little devices/equipment (braille, computer, laptop, visual aids) to assist the visually and hearing impaired;
 - iv. supporting their children by relying solely on memory and audio sessions;
 - v. the absence of Interpreters to assist online significantly hampered the effectiveness of the communications;
 - vi. some of the parents did not know sign language and thus could not communicate with their children appropriately;
 - vii. Teachers were not trained to utilize the software tools and how to navigate search engines to make learning helpful;
 - viii. The online learning platforms managed by the MoE did not allow teachers the ability to be creative for the hearing impaired to understand the work;
 - ix. Inability of parents to relate to the work being done by their children, and
 - x. Inability of parents to provide the necessary additional support in assisting their children to accurately or sufficiently complete assignments.
- 3.47. Support Autism Trinidad and Tobago (SAT^T) reported that 10 of the 14 special needs students in their membership who attended public schools have stopped doing work since the closure of schools owing to the following:
- the activities on the online platforms did not provide the visual stimulation needed by this group of students. As a result, they were unable to complete the assignments; and
 - parents were unable to effectively assist students as many rely on the teachers and teachers' aides.
- 3.48. SAT^T highlighted that of their 53 students attending private schools; 22 were able to continue studying, while the other 31 were unable to continue due to non-payment of school fees.
- 3.49. The Down Syndrome Family Network (DSFN) reported that access to devices is also a challenge for special needs students. Hypothetically, if a household has a single device, the priority for usage may not be given to the special needs student, but to the other children within the household.

Initiatives to incorporate psychosocial care during the COVID-19 period

- 3.50. The MoE through, its Student Support Services Division (SSSD), has provided support to students in the following ways:
- i. Psycho-educational sessions posted onto the MoE's School Learning Management System (SLMS) focused on some of the following topics:
 - o Managing the Transition from Face-to-Face Learning to Online Learning;
 - o Managing One's Mental and Emotional Well-Being;
 - o Managing Transitions; and
 - o Coping with Difficult Situations.
 - ii. Synchronous sessions were conducted by Guidance Officers with Standard 5, CSEC and CAPE students, in order to provide support for students experiencing heightened feelings of anxiety;
 - iii. Content was formatted for delivery via Virtual Classroom sessions on the *MeetMoe* Platform and Social Media;
 - iv. Guidance Officers connected with students, with the consent of their parents, via WhatsApp and teleconferencing to conduct individual virtual counselling sessions;
 - v. Psychologists (via district Multidisciplinary Teams, the Social Work Hotline and/or the SLMS platform) utilized a remote referral system to continue the process of student engagement. The identified students participated in consultations with the psychologists and had access to therapeutic support where necessary.
- 3.51. As at May 22, 2020, the SSSD recorded the following as it relates to psycho-social support for students:
- 1200 phone calls received via its hotline; and
 - 50 cases of parents requesting counselling sessions for withdrawal, anxiety, sexual predators, suicidal thoughts and inexplicable aggression; and
 - 75 critical incidents of suicide ideation, drowning and inexplicable withdrawal and aggression.
- 3.52. The DSFN highlighted the need of special needs students and their families to be the recipients of psychosocial support during the COVID-19 period.

- 3.53. During the virtual public hearing held on June 05, 2020, the Committee was informed that principals ensured that parents of students were made aware of the hotline numbers required to access psycho-social support provided by the SSSD. Efforts were also made to provide psycho-social support for students and teachers through other support groups.

Communication of COVID-19 Guidelines and Protocols for Re-Opening via Easy-to-Use Mediums for Special Needs Students

- 3.54. The DSFN submitted that it has provided parents and/or guardians with information and guidelines from international organisations to assist with the safety of special needs children during the COVID-19 pandemic and for parents of special needs students to encourage and assist them to continue teaching students while at home.
- 3.55. During the virtual public hearing held on June 05, 2020 stakeholders lamented the need for alternative methods of communicating health and safety protocols to special needs students and students with comorbidities in relation to the utilisation of schools' compounds.
- 3.56. SATT indicated that NGOs have provided information for children with special needs. However, there have been no initiatives from Ministries to provide information to the special needs community during the COVID-19 pandemic.

FINDINGS

- i. The Committee noted the multiplicity of challenges faced by students and parents of special needs students during this extraordinary period. Given that the environment required to teach special needs student are uniquely designed, the imperatives of counteracting the pandemic such as social distancing and the wearing of masks, would have significantly diminished the ability of special need students to fully benefit from teaching activities under this period.
- ii. The SATT and DSFN have received no communication from the SSSD except for the initial contact with some members of the organizations during the SSSD's data collection exercise;

- iii. As at June 05, 2020, the MoE has only provided online learning options for special needs students and due to the configuration of the content of these online platforms, they have afforded limited to no assistance to special needs students. Essentially these platforms are not “one size fit all” technology and as such, it was deduced that this cohort of students were at a serious disadvantage during the stay-at-home period.
- iv. The MoE through its SSSD has commenced initiatives to allow students a reasonable level of access to psycho-social support during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, it is critical that the MoE conduct an evaluation of the efficacy/impact of the services delivered by SSSD during this period.
- v. The DSFN and the SATT are unaware of local programmes that have provided guidelines for parents of special needs children to keep their children safe during the period of the pandemic.
- vi. MoE is seeking additional funding to augment the services provided by the SSSD.
- vii. HSE guidelines and school re-opening protocols need to be more accessible for students with special needs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- A. Given that special needs students were significantly disadvantaged during this period of public health emergency, the MoE should give consideration to the following:**
 - i. Holding consultations with organisations, parents and teachers who support children with special needs to determine appropriate responses and interventions strategies that can be implemented during situations which require schools to be prematurely closed.**
- B. In furtherance of recommendation (A) above, the MoE should collaborate with the NPTA and organisations representing children with special needs to explore options/avenues for providing basic training in teaching/learning techniques to parents/guardians of students with special needs. For example, the teaching of sign language classes to parents online as a means of empowering them to assist their children in a more effective manner.**

- C. That the MOE adopt an equal access to information policy that will guide the Ministry's approach to disseminating information to stakeholders in a consistent, fair and accurate manner.**

OBJECTIVE 4: TO EXAMINE TEACHERS' RESPONSE AND TEACHER SUPPORT SYSTEMS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

ISSUES

TTUTA's guidelines to teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic

- 3.57. The Ministry has received and reviewed TTUTA's Guidelines to Members Working from Home during the "COVID-19 Pandemic" and was generally satisfied with the document but expressed some reservations with the number of hours teachers were required to work on a daily basis. Interestingly the Permanent Secretary in the MoE found the proposed hours of work to be substantial. The Committee noted that teaching during the COVID-19 period was voluntary and MoE could not dictate the number of hours or time period for teachers to conduct online classes.
- 3.58. The 'Guidelines to Members Working from Home during the COVID-19 Period' from TTUTA was shared with the National Parent Teachers Association (NPTA). The document provides guidance in the following areas:
- i. Contractual guidelines;
 - ii. Communications;
 - iii. Professionalism;
 - iv. Suggested screen time for students of different levels;
 - v. Safety and security of students and teachers;
 - vi. Work-life balance;
 - vii. Code of Ethics within the virtual classes;
 - viii. Record of the content and classes; and
 - ix. Reporting of inappropriate behaviour observed.

Challenges faced by teachers with Online Teaching and Learning

- 3.59. The various stakeholders (NAPSPA, PPSBE, PSSBE, ASJA Board of Education, APPSST&T) highlighted the following challenges encountered by teachers in their attempts to deliver online teaching and learning:
- i. Students were unable to access the Ministry of Education’s (MOE) School Learning and Management System (SLMS) platform and other online platforms;
 - ii. Teachers and students lacked access to the internet and necessary devices for online learning;
 - iii. Inability to communicate effectively with special needs students who required uniquely designed teaching techniques which invariably involved face-to-face interactions;
 - iv. Poor student attendance during online classes;
 - v. Students were not completing assignments;
 - vi. No standardized guidelines and protocols for online teaching and learning;
 - vii. Lack of motivation from students to engage in online learning especially in low performing schools;
 - viii. Students’ lack of acceptance of this modality as a long-term instructional/learning medium; and
 - ix. Students’ psychosocial needs outweighing their academic pursuits.

Initiatives to incorporate psychosocial care during the COVID-19 period

- 3.60. The CEMB indicated that psychosocial support was provided to its teachers and students via referrals to the SSSD hotlines or other support hotlines and religious support groups.
- 3.61. The MoE’s submission indicated that the Guidance and Counselling Unit of the SSSD developed and uploaded materials to the MOE SLMS platform to support teachers in managing their own stressors at this time as well as managing the process of moving from a structured teaching-learning environment to managing the teaching -learning process in an environment that requires students to be self-directed in their approach.
- 3.62. The MoE indicated that the same psycho-social support initiatives that are afforded to students (**item 3.59**) are available for teachers.
- 3.63. During the virtual public hearing on May 22, 2020, TTUTA stated that teachers have reported having psycho-social issues due to the following:

- i. Difficulties balancing working-from-home and personal life;
- ii. Personal challenges due to multiple impacts of COVID-19;
- iii. Transitioning and adjusting from normal teaching to online teaching;
- iv. Inappropriate and deviant behaviour of parents/guardians/relatives towards teachers;
and
- v. Lack of supervision by parents of students during online classes.

Participation of teachers in online teaching and learning

- 3.64. In March it was estimated that approximately 9% (1200/14000) and in April approximately 32% (4500/14000) of teachers conducted online classes via the MoE's SLMS but the MoE could not verify the number of teachers that are utilizing alternative means and other online platforms to facilitate teaching.
- 3.65. The Association of Principals of Public Secondary Schools of Trinidad and Tobago (APPSST&T) indicated that the Caribbean Association of Principals of Secondary Schools (CAPSS) has provided online teaching and learning workshops and training sessions to principals and teachers during the COVID-19 period.
- 3.66. Teacher activity during the COVID-19 pandemic was voluntary as such, Principals and Deans are unable to monitor the performance and participation of teachers in online teaching and learning classes.
- 3.67. The Catholic Board of Education Management (CEBM) indicated that 80% of the teachers at their schools have used a variety of platforms to deliver online classes.
- 3.68. The APPST&T indicated that the majority of teachers declined to provide any formal reporting of their on-line teaching outputs because of the position adopted by members of the profession, that is, teaching was voluntary when schools are closed. However, many teachers shared their experiences with their principals or HODs via:
 - Ad hoc internal reporting system; and
 - Teachers' feedback.

- 3.69. Principals, Vice-Principals, and Deans of the schools under the PSSBE claimed that they were able to monitor curriculum delivery to ensure that the curriculum is completed.

FINDINGS

- i. Incorporating online teaching at the primary and secondary levels will require a renegotiation of the terms and conditions of service for teachers between the recognised Union, the Chief Personnel Officer, and other stakeholders to determine the protocols, legal obligations and implications.
- ii. The work done by teachers during the COVID-19 period was not standardized and was based solely on the discretion of teachers. However, it appeared that some teachers of students with pending examinations attempted to sustain the delivery of the respective syllabi/curricula. Notwithstanding, when schools reopen teachers should be asked to dedicate some time to assess the learning gaps of their students.
- iii. It was concerning that there was generally no arrangement in place to monitor or evaluate the content that was being delivered by teachers via online platforms. As this method of teaching may become a permanent component of teaching methodology, an appropriate mechanism for adequately monitoring the output of teachers must be developed and or introduced.
- iv. Teachers' experiences and challenges using the on-line platform has been varied as most were required to abruptly learn about and/or switch to a new instructional modality while learning the technology.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- A. **It is imperative that the MoE collaborate with the Chief Personnel Officer, TTUTA, the Teaching Service Commission and any other relevant stakeholders to determine the legal obligations and implications of incorporating online teaching and learning in the terms and conditions of employment of teachers.**

- B. Subject to the outcome of the recommended action at (A), appropriate mechanisms should be introduced/incorporated into the MoE's online learning platforms to monitor the usage/output of teaching staff (and by extension students and other users)**
- C. That the MoE collaborate with TTUTA to provide training to teachers (on a needs basis) in the use of online teaching and learning platforms.**

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

Mr. Paul Richards
Chairman

Mr. Esmond Forde, MP
Vice-Chairman

Mrs. Glenda Jennings-Smith, MP
Member

Brig. Gen. (Ret.) Ancil Antoine, MP
Member

Mrs. Christine Newallo-Hosein, MP
Member

Ms. Khadijah Ameen
Member

Mr. Rohan Sinanan
Member

Ms. Allyson West
Member

June 30, 2020

APPENDICES

APPENDIX I

Persons who appeared and provided oral evidence

Name of Official	Portfolio	Organization
Public Hearing Held on May 22, 2020		
Mrs. Antonia Tekah-De Freitas	President	Trinidad and Tobago Unified Teachers Association (TTUTA)
Mr. Marlon Seales	1st Vice-President	
Ms. Kady Beckles	General Secretary	
Mr. Kurt Meyer	Acting Permanent Secretary	Ministry of Education
Mrs. Lisa Henry-David	Chief Education Officer (Ag.)	
Mr. Dennis Conrad	Director, Student Support Services Manager	
Public Hearing Held on June 05, 2020		
Mr. Lance Mottley	President	National Primary Schools Principals' Association of Trinidad and Tobago
Ms. Paula Kalkman	Vice President	
Mr. Ronald Mootoo	President	Association of Public Secondary Schools Principals' Association (APPSST&T)
Mrs. Sherra Carrington-James	1st Vice-President (Tobago Representative)	
Mrs. Geeta Kalapnath Maharaj	General Secretary	Presbyterian Primary Schools' Board of Education (PPSBOE)
Mr. Vickram Ramlal	Advisor to the Board	
Mr. Joel Bajnath	Chairman	Presbyterian Secondary Schools' Board of Education
Ms. Affieza Ogeer	General Secretary of the Education Board	ASJA Board of Education (ASJABOE)
Mr. Rahimool Hosein	General Secretary of ASJA Incorporated	
Ms. Sharon Mangroo	Chief Executive Officer	Catholic Education Board (CEBM)
Mrs. Ayanna Nero	Senior Operations Manager	
Dr. Radica Mahase	Founder/Director	Support Autism Trinidad and Tobago
Ms. Lisa Ghany	Honorary Board Member	Down Syndrome Family Network

APPENDIX II

MINUTES OF MEETINGS

EXCERPT OF MINUTES OF THE THIRTY-EIGHTH MEETING OF THE JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE OF PARLIAMENT APPOINTED TO INQUIRE INTO AND REPORT ON SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION, FACILITATED VIA THE ZOOM VIDEO CONFERENCING PROGRAM, ON FRIDAY MAY 22, 2020

PRESENT

Members

Mr. Paul Richards	Chairman
Brig. Gen. (Ret'd) Ancil Antoine, MP	Member
Mrs. Christine Newallo-Hosein, MP	Member

Secretariat

Mr. Julien Ogilvie	Secretary
Mr. Johnson Greenidge	Assistant Secretary
Ms. Aaneesa Baksh	Graduate Research Assistant
Ms. Nicole Brown	Parliamentary Intern

ABSENT

Mr. Esmond Forde, MP	Vice-Chairman (excused)
Mrs. Glenda Jennings-Smith, MP	Member (excused)
Mr. Rohan Sinanan	Member (excused)
Ms. Allyson West	Member (excused)
Ms. Khadijah Ameen	Member (excused)

VIRTUAL PUBLIC HEARING re: the Ministry of Education's strategies for ensuring continuity in the delivery of education amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic

1. The meeting resumed in public at 10:35 a.m.
2. The following persons joined the meeting:

Ministry of Education (MOE)

Mr. Kurt Meyer	Permanent Secretary (Ag.)
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Mrs. Lisa Henry-David	Chief Education Officer (Ag.)
Professor Dennis Conrad	Director, SSSD ²

Trinidad and Tobago Unified Teachers Association (TTUTA)

Mrs. Antonia Tekah-De Freitas	President
Mr. Marlon Seales	1st Vice-President
Ms. Kady Beckles	General Secretary

3. The Chairman welcomed the witnesses present and introductions were exchanged.

Opening Statements

4. The following chief officials gave brief opening remarks.

- Mr. Kurt Meyer - Permanent Secretary (Ag.), MOE; and
- Mrs. Antonia Tekah-De Freitas - President.

Key Issues Discussed

5. The following are the key subject areas/issues discussed during the hearing:

Issues discussed with the Ministry of Education (MOE)

- i. The MOE identified that approximately 68,000 students are in need of devices as at May 21, 2020.
- ii. The major challenge of the teachers and students to online learning is the lack of access to necessary devices and internet access.
- iii. The Ministry intends to distribute, by May 29, 2020, laptops to the 5,800 teachers who indicated that they required a device to conduct online teaching.
- iv. The laptops to be distributed to teachers will be sourced from the 12,000 laptops which were procured and distributed to secondary schools in 2018.
- v. The Ministry has been in contact with the Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago (TATT) and some Internet Service providers to allow for students to access their servers free of charge.
- vi. The Ministry will be receiving devices for students from the private sector and NGOs including UNICEF but will also submit a Note to Cabinet to request additional devices for the 68,000 students who are in need.

² Student Support Services Division

- vii. The Ministry has received and reviewed TTUTA's *Guidelines to Members Working from Home during the "COVID-19 Pandemic"* and was generally satisfied with the document, but expressed some reservations with the number of hours teachers were required to work on a daily basis.
- viii. As teachers are voluntarily providing online teaching, the Ministry cannot be prescriptive regarding the length of online classes.
- ix. The Ministry has drafted a policy on online teaching and learning which is aimed at continuity of the schools' curricula in the event of school closure and will be submitted to Cabinet after completion.
- x. Approximately 4000 teachers are providing online services via the Ministry's Learning Management System (LMS) but they could not verify the number of teachers that are utilising alternative means and other online platforms for teaching.
- xi. The Student Support Services Division (SSSD) of the Ministry is engaging with special needs students via the following media:
 - LMS platform of the Ministry;
 - WhatsApp;
 - Zoom; and
 - Individual care packages via mail.
- xii. The SSSD's greatest challenge with regard to marginalised and special needs students is that there are students who are unable to maintain a sustained interaction with teachers on an online platform.
- xiii. The SSSD is currently utilising all available resources to address and assist marginalised students but the Ministry is seeking additional funding to augment the services provided by this Division.
- xiv. The Ministry is seeking to assess the feasibility of incorporating Virtual Reality (VR) technology in the teaching of vocational and CVQ students using innovations such as VR labs. Members of the diaspora are being engaged to solicit support for this initiative.
- xv. Prior to the Covid-19 crisis, the Ministry's IT resources were focused on operationalising the Education Management Information Services (EMIS), which was launched in 2019. The Learning Management System (LMS) was at the testing phase. However, due to the COVID-19 crisis, the implementation of the system was fast-tracked. As such, there was limited time to train teachers and technicians to use the system. The Ministry has since been reviewing the LMS and to increase the services provided especially for special needs students.
- xvi. The Ministry has liaised with the Ministry of Health on the Health and Safety guidelines that need to be implemented within schools to proceed with exams. The MoE collaborated with school principals on protocols for entering school

compounds, sanitisation of schools and the provision of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and cleaning supplies to schools.

- xvii. The Ministry indicated that the exam dates for CSEC and CAPE are still within the June/July period and SEA will be held one month from the date schools re-open.
- xviii. The format of the CSEC and CAPE examinations will focus on the multiple-choice exams and School Based Assessments (SBAs). The subjects without SBAs will have a Paper 2 written examination.
- xix. The assessment for students seeking enrolment at the University of the West Indies (UWI) will be based on the student's CAPE Unit 1 marks in Lower Six, rather than their CAPE Unit 2 results for 2020 as these would not be released in time for matriculation purposes.
- xx. In summary, the SSSD recorded the following as it relates to psycho-social support for students:
 - 1200 phone calls received via its hotline; and
 - 50 cases of parents requesting counselling sessions for withdrawal, anxiety, sexual predators, suicidal thoughts and inexplicable aggression.
- xxi. The SSSD is providing virtual counselling sessions and is in the process of creating more opportunities to assist students with psycho-social issues.
- xxii. All information received by the Ministry on students who need social services are forwarded to the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services (MSDFS).
- xxiii. Students who may be exhibiting flu-like symptoms due to allergies will be asked to provide a medical doctor's report indicating that the student has allergies as a condition for gaining entry into exam rooms. Additionally, all students will be questioned on their medical history and their family's medical history during the two weeks period prior to the date of the CSEC exams.
- xxiv. While the Ministry acknowledged the limitation of disseminating learning content via radio, this medium was identified as an option to reach students who may not have access to network devices, internet, or TV.

Issues discussed with the Trinidad and Tobago Unified Teachers Association (TTUTA)

- i. TTUTA highlighted that approximately 5 percent of their teachers do not have access to devices.

- ii. The 'Guidelines to Members Working from Home During the COVID-19 Period' from TTUTA was shared with the National Parent Teachers Association (NPTA). The document provides guidance in the following areas:
 - a. Contractual guidelines;
 - b. Communications;
 - c. Professionalism;
 - d. Safety and security of students and teachers;
 - e. Reporting of inappropriate behaviour observed;
 - f. Suggested screen time for students of different levels;
 - g. Work-life balance; and
 - h. Record of the content and classes.
- iii. SBAs for students in some schools have been completed while others are yet to be completed due to the following challenges:
 - a. The need for face-to-face communication for some exams e.g. Physics, Pure Math;
 - b. The lack of required resources to print and assess scripts/submissions e.g. Technical Drawing
 - c. Industrial environment needed for the completion of some Caribbean Vocation Qualifications (CVQs) e.g. furniture making
 - d. The CXC's CVQ central office located in Jamaica is currently closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic;
 - e. Assessing Performing Arts subjects may require the use of school facilities.
- iv. Teachers in different communities may not focus on online teaching and delivering the curriculum as their students may require pastoral care based on their circumstances.
- v. Teachers may face the following challenges with online teaching:
 - It is up to the parents of ECCE students to implement the teaching plan uploaded by teachers;
 - Lack of motivation from students to engage in online learning especially in low performing schools;
- vi. TTUTA stated that teachers have reported having psycho-social issues due to the following:
 - a. Difficulties balancing working-from-home and personal life;
 - b. Personal challenges due to multiple impacts of COVID-19;
 - c. Transitioning and adjusting from normal teaching to online teaching;
 - d. Inappropriate and deviant behaviour of parents/guardians/relatives towards teachers; and

- e. Lack of supervision by parents of students during online classes.

Requested information

6. The Committee requested the following additional information:

TTUTA

- i. Provide a copy of the 'Guidelines to Members Working from Home during the COVID-19 Period'.

MOE

- a. Provide the estimated number of primary schools and students who have not completed the SEA curriculum.

SUSPENSION

- Closing remarks were made by the chief officials present.
- The Chairman thanked all present and gave closing remarks.
- The Chairman suspended the meeting at 12:01 p.m.

ADJOURNMENT

- a. The meeting was adjourned at 12:08 p.m.

I certify that these Minutes are true and correct.

Chairman

Secretary

June 02, 2020

APPENDIX III: PUBLIC HEARING SUMMARY JUNE 05 2020



Summary of Proceedings
Virtual Public Hearing
Held on Friday June 05, 2020
[10:31 a.m. to 12:26 p.m.]

2nd virtual hearing³ re: An inquiry into the Ministry of Education’s strategies for ensuring continuity in the delivery of education amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Committee members

The following committee members were present:

1. Mr. Paul Richards – Chairman
2. Brig. Gen. (Ret.) Ancil Antoine, MP
3. Mrs. Christine Newallo-Hosein, MP
4. Mr. Esmond Forde, MP
5. Ms. Khadijah Ameen (observed)

Witnesses who appeared

The following officials were present:

National Primary Schools Principals’ Association (NAPSPA)

- | | |
|----------------------|----------------|
| 1. Mr. Lance Mottley | President |
| 2. Ms. Paula Kalkman | Vice-President |

³ Facilitated via the Zoom Video Conferencing platform

Association of Principals of Public Secondary Schools of Trinidad and Tobago (APPSST&T)

1. Mr. Ronald Mootoo President
2. Mrs. Sherra Carrington-James 1st Vice-President (Tobago representative)

Presbyterian Primary Schools' Board of Education (PPSBE)

1. Mrs. Geeta Kalapnath Maharaj General Secretary
2. Mr. Vickram Ramlal Advisor to the Board

Presbyterian Secondary Schools' Board of Education (PSSBE)

1. Mr. Joel Bajnath Chairman

ASJA Board of Education

1. Ms. Affieza Ogeer General Secretary of the Education Board
2. Mr. Rahimool Hosein General Secretary of ASJA Incorporated

Catholic Education Board (CEMB)

1. Ms. Sharon Mangroo General Secretary
2. Mrs. Ayanna Nero Senior Operations Manager

Support Autism Trinidad and Tobago (SATT)

1. Dr. Radica Mahase Founder/Director

Down Syndrome Family Network (DSFN)

1. Ms. Lisa Ghany Honorary Board Member

Key Issues Discussed

The following are the key subject areas/issues discussed during the hearing:

Challenges faced by Teachers and Students with Online Teaching and Learning

- vii. The National Primary Schools Principals' Association (NAPSPA) highlighted the following challenges to online learning:
 - a. Students were unable to access the Ministry of Education's (MOE) School Learning Management System (SLMS) platform and other online platforms;

- b. Teachers and students lacked access to the internet; and
 - c. A limited number of students engaged in e-learning when using online platforms.
- viii. The Association of Principals of Public Secondary Schools of Trinidad and Tobago (APPSST&T) indicated that the Caribbean Association of Principals of Secondary Schools (CAPSS) has provided online teaching and learning workshops and training sessions to principals and teachers during the COVID-19 period.
- ix. The Presbyterian Primary Schools' Board of Education (PPSBE) highlighted the following challenges associated with the delivery of online learning:
- a. Lack of devices and internet connectivity for teachers and students;
 - b. Teachers' inability to effectively utilise online teaching and learning platforms;
 - c. Inability to communicate with special needs students due to a lack of face-to-face interactions; and
 - d. No accountability for the work of teachers as TTUTA's⁴ work from home policy indicated that the work during the COVID-19 period was voluntary.
- x. The PPSBE focused on providing pastoral care to students rather than providing devices for online learning, since many students and their families needed such care during the period.
- xi. The work done by teachers during the COVID-19 period was not standardised as each teacher focused on different topics. Only the teachers of students in examination classes continued with curriculum teaching. As such, there will be a need for teachers to assess the progress of students when school reopens in September 2020.
- xii. The challenges of the Presbyterian Secondary Schools' Board of Education (PSSBE) included:
- a. Lack of students' participation during the online classes;
 - b. Poor student attendance for online classes; and
 - c. Students were not completing assignments.
- xiii. Principals, Vice-Principals, and Deans of the schools under the PSSBE are monitoring curriculum delivery to ensure that the curriculum is completed.
- xiv. The challenges of the ASJA Board of Education included:

⁴ Trinidad and Tobago Unified Teachers Association

- a. Students were not prepared to utilise the online teaching and learning platforms;
 - b. Students and teachers lacked the necessary devices for online learning;
 - c. Some teachers were unable to effectively use the online platforms; and
 - d. No standardised guidelines for online teaching and learning.
- xv. The Catholic Education Management Board (CEMB) met with teachers to assess the needs of teachers and students and facilitated these needs via training and televised classes for students and the provision of devices and internet and print materials.
- xvi. According to the Down Syndrome Family Network (DSFN) the inequalities within the education system facing special needs students were exacerbated during the stay at home period. Many students were unable to engage in face-to-face interactions and other necessary treatments for their learning, such as speech therapy and physical therapy.
- xvii. The CEMB indicated that psychosocial support was provided to its teachers and students via referrals to the SSSD⁵ hotlines or other support hotlines and religious support groups.
- xviii. The DSFN highlighted that special needs students and their families are in need of psychosocial support during the COVID-19 period.
- xix. Access to devices is also a challenge for special needs students. It was noted that if a household has a single device, the priority for usage may not be given to the special needs student, but to the other children within the household.
- xx. The DSFN posted and shared informative videos to parents of special needs students to encourage and assist them to continue teaching students while at home.
- xxi. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Support Autism Trinidad and Tobago (SATT) conducted a survey on the number of students with autism who are attending school. The survey found that out of 140 children registered with the organisation:
- a. 14 students attend public schools;
 - b. 53 students attend private schools; and
 - c. 72 students were not attending a school.
- xxii. SATT indicated that 10 of the 14 special needs students in their membership who attended public schools have stopped doing work since the closure of schools owing to the following:

⁵ Student Support Services Division, Ministry of Education

- a. The activities on the online platforms did not provide the visual stimulation needed by this group of students. As a result, they were unable to complete the assignments; and
 - b. Parents are unable to effectively assist students as many rely on the teachers and teachers' aides;
- xxiii. The SATT highlighted that of their 53 students attending private schools; 22 were able to continue studying, while the other 31 were unable to continue due to non-payment of school fees.

Food Support for Students

- i. Stakeholders indicated that in instances, where the students in need were unable to access the food support services, the schools, teachers and the private sector assisted by providing hampers and food support to the students and their families.
- ii. The PPSBE indicated that approximately 20% of the students registered to receive food support were able to receive it.
- iii. There was miscommunication between the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, Members of Parliament and school principals on the criteria for selecting students and the administering of food cards to students of the School Feeding Programme.
- iv. The school feeding programme lists in many schools were not up-to-date as the circumstances of students' families on the list changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Lack of Devices and Internet Connectivity for Teachers and Students

- ii. The NAPSPA and PPSBE indicated that as at June 05, 2020, the MOE commenced preparations for the distribution of the 12,000 laptops earmarked for teachers.
- iii. The MOE collaborated with school principals to identify students in need of devices and internet connectivity. However, as at June 05, 2020 there has not been further communication from MOE to assist students.
- iv. The NAPSPA submitted to the MOE a proposal for the Government to allow channels 4, 9, and 14 to broadcast scheduled classes for students from Infants to Standard 5 from Monday to Friday, 9am to 3pm. However, there has been no feedback from the MOE.

- v. The PPSBE concurs with the view of the NAPSPA that televised classes should be used to connect with a wider cross-section of the students as it is the less expensive option and many households are already in possession of a TV.
- vi. The APPSST&T and PPSBE indicated that there has been no significant improvement on the device and internet connectivity situation of teachers and students.
- vii. The PPSBE highlighted that consideration needs to be given to continuing online teaching / learning when schools reopen and going forward. For this to be successful, students and teachers should be provided with the necessary resources such as devices and internet connectivity.

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and Infrastructure for SEA, CSEC and CAPE Examinations

- i. The PSSBE indicated that there are Health and Safety Environment (HSE) concerns which need to be addressed at their schools prior to the reopening of schools for the CAPE and CSEC examinations and completion of School-Based Assessments (SBAs).
- ii. The ASJA Board of Education indicated that extensive HSE preparation needs to be done within their schools to accommodate the examinations; they suggest that all schools have a safety officer assigned for the duration of the examinations.
- iii. The APPSST&T indicated that schools have received brief and general guidelines from the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) and the MOE on the preparation of schools for the examinations. Schools were subsequently asked to submit to the MOE the list of necessary equipment for the school to implement the guidelines.
- iv. Witnesses indicated there were no official guidelines or receipt of equipment from the MOE for the preparation of schools for the examinations, as at June 05, 2020. However, principals of schools have commenced the preparation of schools for examinations based on general social distancing and sanitisation measures.
- v. The CEBM indicated that most SBAs for the students of schools under their remit were completed. However, the Internal Assessments (IA) for CAPE, which require practical assessments, have faced difficulties.
- vi. The APPSST&T highlighted that the MOE has commenced a scheduled distribution of cleaning supplies to schools by district. However, the distribution may not be effective as there are school districts, such as Victoria, which are scheduled to receive cleaning supplies from June 12th but expect students to be in schools to complete SBAs from June 8th.

- vii. The need to consider alternative methods to communicate health and safety protocols to special needs students as the usual form of communication may not be suitable for students with physical disabilities, such as the visually impaired. Further, the DSFN highlighted that protocols for the reopening should consider the needs of students with comorbidities.
- viii. The SATT indicated that NGOs have provided information for children with special needs. However, the organisation claimed that there have been no initiatives from Ministries to provide information to the special needs community during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- ix. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the SATT and DSFN had a good relationship with the SSSD. However, during the COVID-19 situation, these organisations have received no communication from the SSSD.
- x. The APPSST&T had no issues with the decision to utilise the CAPE Unit One marks for the matriculation into the University of the West Indies as it should provide a good projection of the students' marks.
- xi. The PPSBE recommends that psychological assessments be done for all students scheduled to sit examinations to determine their mental health before taking examinations.

Distance Learning and the Way Forward

- i. The ASJA Board of Education highlighted that while there is nothing that can replace the physical presence of a teacher within a classroom, distance learning can begin immediately provided that all teachers and students are able to access a device.
- ii. Additionally, the ASJA Board of Education, suggested that teachers conduct their online classes from the schools and utilise the school's resources rather than their own resources.
- iii. The PPSBE indicated that online teaching and learning would require a renegotiation of the terms and conditions of service for teachers between the recognised Union, the Chief Personnel Officer and other stakeholders to determine the protocols, legal obligations and legal implications.
- iv. The CEBM highlighted that distance learning encompasses other components besides online teaching and learning.
- v. Witnesses appearing agreed that the MOE should consult with all stakeholders to discuss the following:

- a. Challenges faced by schools in relation preparing for examinations and the reopening of schools;
- b. Funding for the COVID-19 measures within schools;
- c. The way forward for education with respect to online and distance learning;
- d. Drafting and implementation of Guidelines/Protocols for the reopening of schools;

View the Hearing

The hearing can be viewed on our YouTube channel via the following link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=64VDknwCUGk>

Contact the Committee's Secretary

jscspa@tpparliament.org or 624-7275 Ext. 2283

Committees Unit

June 09, 2020

APPENDIX IV

VERBATIM NOTES OF THE VIRTUAL THIRTY-SECOND MEETING OF THE SOCIAL SERVICES & PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION COMMITTEE HELD ON FRIDAY, MAY 22, 2020, AT 10.25 A.M.

PRESENT

Mr. Paul Richards	Chairman
Mrs. Christine Newallo-Hosein	Member
Brig. Gen. Ancil Antoine	Member
Mr. Julien Ogilvie	Secretary
Mr. Johnson Greenidge	Assistant Secretary
Ms. Aaneesa Baksh	Graduate Research Assistant
Ms. Nicole Brown	Parliamentary Intern

ABSENT

Mr. Esmond Forde	Vice-Chairman
Ms. Khadijah Ameen	Member
Mrs. Glenda Jennings-Smith	Member
Mr. Rohan Sinanan	Member
Ms. Allyson West	Member

Ministry of Education

Mr. Kurt Meyer	Acting Permanent Secretary
Mrs. Lisa Henry-David	Chief Education Officer (Ag.)
Mr. Dennis Conrad	Director, Student Support Services Manager

Trinidad and Tobago Unified Teachers Association (TTUTA)

Mrs. Antonia Tekah-De Freitas	President
Mr. Marlon Seales	1 st Vice-President

Ms. Kady Beckles

General Secretary

Mr. Chairman: I just want to give you all some guidelines. This is a virtual meeting so there are specific guidelines that will apply. Please ensure to mute your microphones when you are not speaking to help us keep the background noise from our various locations that you are coming from to a minimum, and when you are about to speak, we invite you to turn your mikes on or unmute your microphones. And of course, we have all gone through the protocol already of adjusting your cameras so that your faces are clearly visible. If you are on cellphones or any other electronic device in your vicinity, please ensure that they are muted at this time for the course of this meeting.

I am the Committee's Chairman, Paul Richards, and at this time I would like to also ask members of the Committee to introduce themselves starting with member Newallo-Hosein. Please unmute your mike member Newallo-Hosein.

[Introductions made]

Mr. Chairman: And we will be joined in process by member Khadijah Ameen, other members of the Committee include the Vice-Chair of the Committee, MP Esmond Forde, also Mrs. Glenda Jennings-Smith, Mr. Rohan Sinanan and member Allyson West, who are unavoidably otherwise detained at this time. We have two stakeholder groups before us today inclusive of the Ministry of Education, and of course, representatives of the Trinidad and Tobago Unified Teachers Association. So at this time I would like to invite members from the Education Ministry to please identify themselves starting with the Acting Permanent Secretary. Please unmute your microphone.

[Introductions made]

Mr. Chairman: Thank you all and now the Trinidad and Tobago Unified Teachers Association starting with the President, then the 1st Vice-President, then General Secretary.

[Introductions made]

Mr. Chairman: Thank you all for being with us and we appreciate you taking time to be with us and of course your continued service to Trinidad and Tobago, and your charges during this difficult time that Trinidad and Tobago and that the region and the world is facing. And this is a good segue to the objectives of this enquiry.

There are four objectives:

- I. To examine the gaps in the continuity measures of the Ministry of Education during the COVID-19 pandemic;
- II. To assess the accessibility of electronic distance learning initiatives to poor and particularly marginalized students of ECCE, primary and secondary schools during the COVID-19 pandemic;
- III. To assess the Ministry of Education support interventions for low achievers and special needs learners in EEC, primary and secondary schools students; and
- IV. To examine teachers responses and teacher support systems during the COVID-19 pandemic.

At this time, I would like to invite the two leaders of the stakeholder groups to deliver brief opening remarks. We ask them to be about two minutes. First, of course the Acting Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Education, Mr. Kurt Meyer.

Mr. Meyer: Good morning Chairman, members of the Committee, members of the public. The COVID-19 pandemic was an unprecedented crisis. In the space of a 24-hour period the Ministry of Education and all our stakeholders were forced to move from a situation where we were providing teaching and learning in structures, to finding ways to offer the same services virtually. The Ministry has managed this crisis by keeping our day-to-day operations running using remote services. We have provided some level of alternate teaching and learning options using solutions

developed in house by the Ministry staff, and I might add at no cost to the taxpayer.

Our response has been appropriate given our resource constraints. Our ability to respond to this challenge has been primarily due to the dedication of our staff. The teachers, principals, school supervisors, curriculum officers, administrative officers, finance and accounts, and our ICT personnel. Teachers provided access to online classes using their personal devices. Those who could not, used other platforms to send homework and to monitor and to provide some level of learning. As we have reported there are gaps in our service delivery and we are working toward filling them. We welcome the opportunity to discuss our progress, to share our ideas, and to listen to suggestions on how we can improve our service. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you, Mr. Meyer; now Mrs. De Freitas.

Mrs. Tekah-De Freitas: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, good morning colleagues, members of the Committee. TTUTA thanks you for the opportunity to speak here this morning and share the perspective of teachers, of educators during this whole COVID-19 situation. As Mr. Meyer said, it is an unprecedented situation and our teachers stepped in from the get go, from the 16th of March, interacting with students, engaging with students.

As it stands right now we understand that there are gaps, that there are challenges and TTUTA will be pleased to provide the information that we have so we can address those situations going forward. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you and just to add my own context. You know, when we decided on this enquiry we thought it quite appropriate and it is not a blame game enquiry, it is not about casting or castigating it. We realize as many of those in Trinidad and Tobago that this, the COVID-19 pandemic is something the world has had to grapple with and face and put systems in place in several different sectors to ensure that stakeholders are serviced, and in some cases some sectors have done

well, and in critical services like education we realized that there were gaps in the system because of the quick nature of the transition that had to be initiated. So part of what we want to do here is to find out where the gaps are, what are the support services that need more support, and of course, come up with recommendations, so that, at the end of the day the learners are the ones who benefit from this, because we know that there are gaps in terms of the types of services that are being prevented particularly to marginalize our learners in Trinidad and Tobago.

So let me just open by adding also that the presumption is that much of the learning transitioned to online, and I know the Education Ministry also provided very quickly and admirably television and radio support in terms of providing curriculum in television delivery over many of the television stations in Trinidad and Tobago, including TTT, CNC3, and TV6, also an online repository of information, and also uploading curriculum and content online. But a lot of the online delivery is based on the predicate or the presumption that one, learners have devices to receive the content, and two, learners have access to Internet through which the content can pass through their devices. And other of course the variables in the mix. So we want to examine them as objectively as possible to find out where the gaps are, because you are the persons who are on the field.

The Education Ministry has had to come together and deal with it. I know they have been able to fast track what would have been in process anyway. And also, TTUTA as the stakeholder representing the teachers in Trinidad and Tobago, would have had to also rise to the call. So it is not a blame game situation, it is not about castigating. I just want to provide that context for us for an open and frank discussion on how we can facilitate the process being more efficient moving forward.

One of the things that startled me in terms of what was presented, and again, it is just to lay context as in we have 120,455 primary school students registered, and

83,554 secondary school students registered, and I took the liberty of sending forward some questions to the Ministry of Education in terms of trying to assess the layup land as it were, and the information coming back was that 68,000 on average, students were in need of devices to access the curriculum, and also 27,000 in a looser sense were in need of Internet access.

So let us start with the Education Ministry in terms of if there is an update on that information, and what is being done to mitigate those who do not have either devices or Internet at this time, and moving forward into the immediate future?

Mr. Meyer: Okay, well the first question that is the most up to date information we have right now, 68,000 is our last count as of yesterday. We have been collating information almost from day one, but we have been severely challenged in getting the information. And the reason for that is that the Ministry of Education primarily gets this information from teachers, principals, using a paper-based environment. In January we launched our EMIS which is our Education Management Information System, and the lack of that system being able to be fully implemented, we felt it very keenly when your questions came.

Because when we look at those questions we realized that if EMIS was populated up and running, most of the answers would have been online. As it was, we had to gather information, use any the old-fashioned method, send out surveys, manually get the information.

10.35 a.m.

As to what we are doing, we recognized very early on that there was a gap and the gap basically has four moving parts. The first part is the lack of access to Wi-Fi from students, the lack of devices from students. Teachers also do not have devices, some of them do not have access. There is also an issue of training. But by and large, I think the teachers who went on were able to overcome that burden. So the real problems are the devices and the access.

In terms of the students' access, and well access generally, we have been in consultation with TATT and some of the ISPs. And I think generally we have reached a situation where we can—they can be given access to at least our servers free of charge. So the second problem is actually getting the devices to the teachers. Part of the survey we have been doing in the last two to three weeks and we have only just completed it last week, because we tried to find out how many teachers actually needed devices. We were able to identify I believe it is over 5000 teachers who require devices and we are working towards distributing those laptops hopefully by next week.

Now, we were very lucky in this case, again, because we had procured a significant number of laptops for use in the schools so we have laptops for teachers. Devices for students, that has been a very severe challenge, because the initial numbers we were looking at was roughly around 60,000 which is a staggering figure. And eventually when we started to get more information we got that down to 68,000. We have been meeting with various agencies. We have had some promises from UNICEF and some other agencies have quite a few laptops; some local stakeholders have also provided us some laptops. We also are in the process of preparing a note to cabinet to request devices, because we realized that as generous as the private sector is going to be, it is not going to be able to fill the gap. So we have come up with a basic design—basic specification for tablets and that is what we are going to try to procure in a very short space of time.

Mr. Chairman: And that represents about 33.3 percent of the student body, primary and secondary school, who are in need of devices, which is significant. And you mentioned that 5,000 teachers are in need of that. Mrs. De Freitas, what percentage of the teaching body in primary and secondary schools does that represent if you can? And what have been the challenges where teachers are concerned in terms of

that, and those who have devices probably having to use their own devices, and the security issues that may arise because of that?

Mrs. Tekah-De Freitas: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. We would estimate that is probably about 5 per cent of our own membership of our teachers at this point in time, and as Mr. Meyer reported, the Ministry of Education did indicate—the Minister I am sorry, indicated to TTUTA in a meeting that Cabinet gave approval for about 12,000 laptops to be issued to teachers.

The challenge arose where we had to look at one, the distribution during the stay at home period and TTUTA advised members not to go out or disobey the Public Health Regulations, and two, the contract given the fact that we were looking at dispensing with Government equipment to persons, we found that it was necessary to review the contract. TTUTA has reviewed the contract and we submitted it back to the CEO, the Acting CEO Ms. Henry-David, for their final perspectives, and as far as we are concerned those teachers who have desired laptops, they should be able to access it in due course based on how quickly the process goes forward with contracts and so forth. If I may continue, Sir?

Mr. Chairman: No, member Hosein has a question. Member Hosein, go ahead please.

Mrs. Tekah-De Freitas: Oh, sorry.

Mr. Chairman: Unmute your mike please, thank you.

Mrs. Newallo-Hosein: Thank you, I just wanted ask, the 12,000 laptops that you are referring to, that is Mrs. De Freitas, that stemmed from the response of Mr. Meyer, are these the laptops that the Minister had indicated that would have been provided to schools, 50 laptops to schools some time ago? Are these the 12,000 laptops that you are referring to?

Mrs. Tekah-De Freitas: Mr. Chair, if I may, I think the Ministry may be better able to provide the answer to that question. Our interaction indicated 12,000 and we

were told that these were laptops that were delivered to schools in 2018. So they were new laptops but I think as far as the details as to where they are being—where they are coming from, the Ministry might be better able to provide that information.

Mr. Meyer: Yes, these laptops were purchased around 2018. They were delivered to secondary schools and they are basically brand new laptops, I think on average, they probably have 50 hours of use on them, so they are brand new devices.

Mrs. Newallo-Hosein: If I may ask the question, these laptops, are they currently being utilized by the teachers in this regard where we have COVID-19? Or are they the property of the schools and have to remain in the schools? The laptops—I mean, I would assume that the laptops, if the teachers lack the devices and they are able to utilize these laptops that were provided, right now from what you are saying, it is only to secondary schools, were they able to utilize it to be able to provide online classes to their students, or are these laptops still in the possession of the schools and are not being utilized in this regard?

Mr. Meyer: The laptops are still in the school. They are going to be distributed to both primary and secondary teachers who require them.

Mrs. Newallo-Hosein: In other words, you are saying that the laptops were in fact distributed in 2018 when they were procured to secondary schools, so now you are going to retrieve it from the secondary schools, and distribute it across the board in terms of secondary and primary. And how do you intend to do that Sir, what is the criteria that is going to be used to determine which schools will get and which schools will not?

Mr. Meyer: We will be—we will not be distributing to schools, we will be distributing to individuals. A survey was conducted and we have names of all teachers who have indicated that they require a laptop to conduct online classes. Once the contract has been finalized, the laptops will be distributed to the teachers,

they can go to the school, collect the laptop, sign for it, and they can then go home and deliver online services.

Mrs. Newallo-Hosein: How many laptops are there, Sir?

Mr. Meyer: In all or to be distributed?

Mrs. Newallo-Hosein: That were procured and will be distributed?

Mr. Meyer: Approximately 12,000 laptops were procured and assigned to secondary schools for IT classes or for just general use. Those laptops will then be redistributed to teachers.

Mrs. Newallo-Hosein: So all 12,000?

Mr. Meyer: Not all 12,000, I believe the number is—

Mrs. Newallo-Hosein: How many?

Mr. Meyer:—roughly 5,800. It could be more as I suspect, teachers may require— there may be more teachers who require devices who are using their devices now, but until this crisis is over, the Ministry is prepared to use that stock of laptops to give teachers the ability to access and contact their students.

Mr. Chairman: And Mr. Meyer, to maybe re-align your frames a bit because you are leaning forward and crashing into the head space. As we indicated before, we know this is new for all of us so it is a work in progress. Member Antoine, you had a question?

Brig. Gen. Antoine: TTUTA indicated that they submitted on the 5th of May, a copy of the guidelines to members working from home during the COVID-19 period, can both TTUTA and the Ministry give me an update on that document that was submitted?

Mrs. Tekah-De Freitas: Mr. Chair, if I may, can I allow our General Secretary Ms. Kady Beckles to respond?

Ms. Beckles: Right. Good morning once again. Yes, our general counsel, together with our Industrial Relations Committee would have worked on a document that

would have—would assist teachers in terms of giving them guidelines as they worked from home. I can give you the basic headings that were covered under those guidelines if you will just give me one minute to pull that document up.

Mr. Chairman: Absolutely, and let us remind all our participants to make sure and stay centered in your frame so that we have a nice output in the final product to be broadcast to the general public. Mrs. De Freitas, you need to go up a little bit more. Thank you very much for your cooperation. Go back a little bit. Right, thank you and raise your frame so that you are not so crushed to the bottom of the frame. Ms. Beckles, are you ready for us? Please unmute you mike.

Ms. Beckles: Okay, so let me get back to the document, right. So essentially, we provided a preamble in terms of the COVID-19 situation. And then, our statement of objectives, where these guidelines were developed in an effort to ensure that teachers' rights were not infringed as that the Government shapes its pandemic response and to safeguard teachers from litigation while protecting the rights of children to education.

It is guidelines, the headlines, sorry, the actual guideline, communication in terms of reporting, sorry—in terms of requesting parental consent via email or messaging in order to communicate with students via online, the online platform. Also advising members if whilst they were performing their duties if they observed any untoward—

Mr. Chairman: Content.

Ms. Beckles:—in the background that they were bounded by law to report it to the police and to their principal, all right. Because since these things are easily recorded, you know it is easy to get over there.

Professionalism was another heading, where we reminded our teachers to follow our Code of Conduct and Ethics, to be courteous, and also to encourage them to keep a log of the work taught and an attendance roster as that would facilitate an

easier transition when school eventually reopened. Since during this time we did a revision for students and we were mindful that not all students would have been able to access the various platforms, for whatever reason, bearing in mind that in various homes you would have a number of students, and there might be one device, and they would have to share that up during the day. All right.

We also give them guidelines in terms of realistic expectations in terms of spending time in front of the screen, both for teachers and students at the different levels.

ECCE, we encourage more play time so we had zero minutes—zero minutes in front of the screen; Infants One and Two, 20 minutes per day; Standards 1 to 2, 30 minutes; and Standard 3, 40 minutes; Standards 4 and 5, 60 minutes; Forms 1, 2 and 3, 90 minutes at three sessions at 30 minutes; Forms 4, 5 and 6, 120 minutes, basically breaking that up into four sessions at 30 minutes, right.

Moving along, we also included safety and security, right, we needed teachers should take reasonable steps to ensure their work space was safe. Also, teachers and parents, administrator shall work together to ensure that the time students are required to spend is unlikely to be harmful to them given their age, special needs, and or any environmental conditions to which they may be subjected.

Anyone, anyone on one session, example, pastoral care meeting shall be risk assessed and approved by the school's leadership. Teachers must be aware of the safety measures to take if they are having a problem communicating with a child.

Workplace, work life balance, this is something that we encouraged and included in our document, because this COVID situation has been affecting persons differently. So we advised them to strike a balance and reminded them that it was not school as usual. So it could not be that you were going to be in front of your class for a period of five hours or so for the day, watching over each child, right. We

also, as I said before reminded them of our teachers Code of Ethics, which we would have also forwarded to them.

10.50 a.m.

Mr. Chairman: I think that is quite comprehensive, and if you could just send us a list of it, we will be able to peruse it.

Ms. Beckles: I could send the document?

Mr. Chairman: I would appreciate that. What I want to do is go to the Chief Education Officer Acting, Mrs. Lisa Henry-David and ask you, the hours and interface schedules outlined by Ms. Beckles, did the Education Ministry collaborate on defining those in terms of the schedule for classrooms, and if that is part of what the Education Ministry has initiated because of the safety requirements and exposure to screen time and how the Education Ministry expected it to roll out even though on this exigent circumstance moving forward? So if Mrs. Henry-David can respond to that please? Mrs. Henry-David, are you hearing us?

Mrs. Henry-David: Yes. Sorry, I am hearing you now. I was cut off for a short while there. So is it possible for you to repeat the question?

Mr. Chairman: Okay, no problem. Ms. Beckles indicated a while ago that they had sent out a communique to teachers, TTUTA that is, about the schedule of time for primary, secondary school and ECCE learners in terms of interface with teachers and scheduling, to try as much as possible to get the curriculum done while observing screen time safety protocols for learners. Was the Education Ministry collaborated on that and has that been done by the Education Ministry in terms of trying to streamline scheduling of classes, exposure time for students and teachers to try to complete as much of the curriculum that can be completed in terms of delivery even under these exigent circumstances?

Mrs. Henry-David? Did you hear the question? I think she is having some Internet problems. So we will come back to her in a short while. Let me go back to

then the Permanent Secretary Acting on that. Was that part of the collaborative effort? Mr. Meyer.

Mr. Meyer: I have been trying to bring some order to that very situation. TTUTA's guidelines, we have reviewed this and, by and large, they fall in line with what we think can be done. We have—[*Audio problems*]

Mr. Chairman: I am wondering if you have an audio problem with your microphone, because we are not hearing you as clearly as we were hearing you before? So if you could ensure that the audio system is what it was before because we were—

Mr. Meyer: Are you hearing me now?

Mr. Chairman: Yes. That is better. Thank you, go ahead. Start over please. Thank you.

Mr. Meyer: Okay. Yes we reviewed TTUTA's guidelines. It is basically in line with what we have been be working on. We have initiated discussions with the Chief Personnel Officer, because we think that these guidelines need to be done in a very structured manner. We cannot, at this time, be too prescriptive in terms of guidelines, because a lot of the teachers are voluntarily doing this. So, therefore, we cannot mandate guidelines for one set of teachers and for others who are not able to actually access. But generally, these guidelines are what we would want to put in place and we have no difficulty with what we saw. Probably a few tweaks, probably some less hours. Because right now the system is actually changing.

With the LMS, we are able to monitor in some detail what is actually taking place, and there are teachers right now who are managing classes of the size of 120 students for over three hours. There are some significant learnings from this, in terms of how teachers are managing. Students are going where they are engaged. Teachers are able to control 120 children for three hours which is an amazing feat considering the trauma that everyone is going through. CEO, I think is able to

respond now.

Mr. Chairman: Yes, go ahead. Is she up? I think she is having some Internet problems probably. Could you unmute your mike please, Mrs. Henry-David and go ahead please?

Mr. Meyer: Unmute your mike. She is unmuted.

Mr. Chairman: Go ahead. We are hearing you. Go ahead please.

Mrs. Henry-David: So in addition to what PS would have indicated—are you hearing me now?

Mr. Chairman: Yes we are hearing you. Go ahead please.

Mrs. Henry-David: Right. In addition to what PS Meyer would have indicated, the Ministry has also drafted a policy for online teaching and learning, and this document will be sent to the Cabinet in the coming weeks once it is updated. But it is intended to outline on policies related to the range of online teaching and learning issues to govern the application, approval and registration of private online teaching schools, classes and courses and to outline the processes and procedures for staff, students and parents to continue with an academic programme in the event of school closures. So it goes beyond the pandemic and it is meant to govern any instance where children have to be out of the physical school compound for a while.

Mr. Chairman: I am going to go to member Antoine who has been waiting a while and then member Hosein you can take over after that. Member Antoine, go ahead please.

Brig. Gen. Antoine: Yes. We are hearing from TTUTA, the Ministry of Education. I am aware that NPTA is not here this morning, but what you are doing towards the NPTA seeing that they represent the parents about these guidelines and how they could interact with the teachers and their children who will be utilizing this online teaching method?

Mr. Chairman: I do not know if Mrs. De Freitas wants to take that or the Education

Ministry Permanent Secretary or Chief Education Officer?

Mr. Meyer: We do intend to meet with the NPTA.

Mr. Chairman: So you have not met with the NPTA yet?

Mr. Meyer: Not yet.

Mr. Chairman: Okay. Mrs. De Freitas, have you had interface with the NPTA?

Mrs. Tekah-De Freitas: Yes, Mr. Chairman. TTUTA sent a copy of the guidelines to the NPTA. We would be aware that there are some internal issues with NPTA and their structure. So due to all different captioned entities within the organization. So they are aware and we have spoken to them about the intent of the document. If I may, Mr. Chair, just add something?

Mr. Chairman: Go ahead, please.

Mrs. Tekah-De Freitas: Yes, in terms of the policy document that the Acting CEO spoke about, TTUTA is of the view that such a document is required to safeguard as we transition from the COVID period into the post-COVID scenario and, therefore, as the PS said, it may not be as prescriptive as the guidelines are. We would be looking at overall policy. What we will want to guide against however, colleagues, is the issue of allowing privatization of the education process to creep into that capacity for online delivery especially for our students in our tertiary level. So that is something we will have to consider in a subsequent discussion.

Mr. Chairman: Could you elaborate? What does that mean, privatization of the process?

Mrs. Tekah-De Freitas: Across the globe, there are situations where private corporations, large corporations for example, go into countries, go into environments and you have to pay for education. For example, in some countries in Africa, you have scenarios where American-run corporations go in, you have to pay—the Government pays these corporations to fund their primary education programmes. It is not as prevalent as in the Caribbean as it is in other parts of the world. That is

a problem with education international, the governing body for teachers' union worldwide. We have been grappling with that for a number of years. In Trinidad and Tobago, what we essentially have are institutions—Mr. Richards you will be familiar—with our institutions that provide tertiary education. That is different from privatization where you are providing education services to a catchment of people who are not in a position or who should be really receiving universal free education.

Mr. Chairman: I understand what you are saying, but from my understanding of our situation, we have universal free education—

Mrs. Tekah-De Freitas: Correct. Correct.

Mr. Chairman:—at ECCE, primary and secondary schools, and there are private institutions to which people can send their children, but it is not. We have had a state-wide policy of that free education for a while.

Mrs. Tekah-De Freitas: That is right.

Mr. Chairman: I understand you are citing it, but it is not really an issue in Trinidad and Tobago to me at this time, but I appreciate you are citing it. Member Hosein, you wanted to chime in on this conversation.

Mrs. Newallo-Hosein: Yes I do. Thank you so much. To Mr. Meyer. You had indicated that teachers are doing it voluntarily which raises the question, what percentage of teachers and schools at the various levels, whether it is ECCE, the primary, secondary and even tertiary are involved in online delivery teaching and learning programmes? And of course—go ahead.

Mr. Chairman: Go ahead, Mr. Meyer. You can go ahead and respond.

Mr. Meyer: Okay. Using our LMS figures, we are able to track as of today, we have approximately 4,000 teachers who are providing some level of online service. They would have been servicing approximately 49,000 students in an online class. So that is our LMS. We are aware that there are a number of other systems that are being operated. Some teachers are contacting their students using WhatsApp, some

via emails, some via phone call. So we are not able to really say the absolute number, but we suspect that it is probably—we probably have the largest group which is probably 4,600, so it is probably not more than half of all the teachers right now. Given the numbers who are actually requesting devices, we suspect it is probably about 50 per cent, but as I said, I cannot say for sure.

Mrs. Newallo-Hosein: And are you satisfied that sufficient online schooling has taken place to allow for one, the effective delivery and completion of the term three curriculum and, more importantly, in the preparation for CSEC completion of the school-based assessment?

Mr. Meyer: Absolutely not. We are not satisfied at all, and we have been working towards bridging the gap. In fact, our mission since March the 15th when we were forced to shut our schools has been to deliver online services to all 225,000 children. That mission has not been completed yet, and it is a daunting task. Because what we are doing is we are basically trying to intervene in households where the parents themselves do not have the ability to provide Internet access or the devices. So the Ministry is trying to intervene in that area. But no, we are definitely not satisfied, but it is a situation that if we had had even a little bit of lead time in terms of knowing that this was going to happen, we would have been able to do things differently, but it came as a shock to us, as it did to most of the country and to most of the world.

Mr. Chairman: Well, to be fair to the Acting Permanent Secretary's response, member Hosein, and that is why I laid the context from the very start that I would have been surprised if Mr. Meyer or anyone in the Education Ministry or anyone in TTUTA or anyone in the country could honestly say that they are surprised, while we are trying to find solutions to what is no doubt a daunting evolving situation, it is an adaptive and evolving situation in many regards. So, you know, I appreciate the Ministry's efforts and what we really want to do is find solutions.

I want to go to the Student Support Services and Prof. Conrad and ask, in light

of what we have discussed so far in terms of the gaps that have evolved because it is an exigent circumstance COVID-19 that has forced the Education Ministry and forced the parents' home in some instances, and just to add to what the teachers are dealing with, in many cases, teachers also have to supervise their own children at home in this circumstance. Also that added to it is not a perfect situation by any means. What has the role been at the Student Support Services in trying to bridge the gap, not only with special needs learners, but now learners who are now faced with these inequities brought on by COVID-19 and trying to re-equalize the situation as much as possible? So if Mr. Conrad could give us an overall sense of the response from Student Support Services through this whole situation please? Mr. Conrad? Prof. Conrad?

Prof. Conrad: Are you hearing me clearly?

Mr. Chairman: Yes. Go ahead please. Thank you.

Prof. Conrad: Well, we are very fortunate in that we were actually at a time— Student Support Services was just at a time when both the Ministry of Education was pushing its agenda for using the digital platform more, as well as we were very much involved in working towards our inclusive schools and pushing forward in terms of improving the accessibility of education for all. So yes we were thrown backwards, but the dispositions and the readiness were really moving forward. So we found a situation where our social workers, our guidance officers, our psychologists, our special educators in different areas were already on the ground trying to engage stakeholders both within the Ministry as well as outside of the Ministry.

We were able to set up quickly a hotline system. We have been able, for the most part, to utilize the platform to provide and engage our students and teachers as well as our parents, as well as we still have specialist teachers and guidance officers, social workers who are literally putting packages in mailboxes and we are finding

that WhatsApp, for example, the students are much more comfortable using WhatsApp than even going on the platform. We have parents who are teachers and other professionals claiming that this is tough work, trying to be able to manage home, motivate kids. And, perhaps the greatest challenge we are having is in terms of students who are marginalized because of interpersonal skills, it might include students with special needs like those with autism, as well as students who may be facing stresses, well-being, who are not likely to be able to maintain a sustained interaction with any platform. To engage them, you would only get them for about two/three minutes. Yet we have schools—some of our schools and our Special Ed teachers have been using Zoom or personal an effective education, to keep them feeling as part of their community, for keeping them involved and connected with each other.

The fact of the matter is that once we are dealing with marginalized populations, we have to recognize that each child warrants individualized attention, warrants a responsiveness to building relationships and warrants some sustained systematic approach, some structure, in order for them to move forward.

Mr. Chairman: Prof. Conrad, you have given me all the right theoretical approaches there.

Prof. Conrad: No, no, no.

Mr. Chairman: Why I am interrupting you is, what I want to get a sense from you is—

Prof. Conrad: The frustrations?

Mr. Chairman: Not the frustrations. Even before COVID-19 Student Support Services, in my information, was stretched to the limit. There were challenges in terms of meeting the needs before COVID-19. Now there are 68,000 students who do not have Internet access or who, 27 per cent—sorry, 68,000 who do not have devices, 27 per cent who do not have Internet access, so the vulnerable group has

been expanded significantly. Have you received extra funding or staff to accommodate for this vast shift in the vulnerable groups in Trinidad and Tobago?

Prof. Conrad: No, not as yet.

Mr. Chairman: And you were struggling before this?

Prof. Conrad: We were struggling before.

Mr. Chairman: So then how are marginalized groups and this additional cohort of vulnerable groups now being attended to in the absence of added resources?

Prof. Conrad: We are drowning, but we are holding on to a lifeline where we are using a strategy and I have to do it. I agree with you Senator, but I have to keep the message to the professionals that this is about inequity. This is about social justice. I cannot even push the argument about what we do not have. I have to push the idea about our commitment to using what we have. It is more about resourcefulness. Now, this what I have to tell them.

Mr. Chairman: I think I am posing the question to the wrong person. *[Laughter]* The question is then to the Acting Permanent Secretary and the Chief Education Officer. What additional resources does the Ministry plan to provide to the Student Support Services in the face of an extremely exponentially increased vulnerable groups of students inclusive of the special education group who are now not receiving education service in Trinidad and Tobago, pushing them into a further marginalized position? Mr. Meyer?

Mr. Meyer: Our budgets are almost stretched to the limit. We are working on estimates now across the board to see if we can get additional funding and that funding will address both Student Support Services, it will also address funding for our devices for the children. But as it stands right now, our budgets do not have the extra capacity in it to do that. We are almost to the point of mid-year review and some of our Votes are exhausted. We did not get sufficient allocation, but we are reviewing all of our Votes and especially the Votes that have to provide services.

We are trying to find a way to get additional funding to do that.

Mr. Chairman: I appreciate the candour in your answer, but I would tell you that has me very, very concerned about those 68,000 students who are now, probably have not been exposed to any form of educational training or curriculum delivery in the last six or so weeks. Member Hosein, you had a question. Your hand was up.

Mrs. Newallo-Hosein: Yes, thank you Chair. It raises a very important point I was making earlier and, that is, under the People's Partnership there was a thrust to move forward into a different set of training and teaching which would have been online and this is why we would have had the laptop initiative which was abruptly stopped by this Government. And so I am saying to you that there would have been a policy in place to prepare for such a time as this that probably would have been ignored, and had the policy been—

Mr. Chairman: Member Hosein, can I interrupt?

Mrs. Newallo-Hosein: We would not have had this.

Mr. Chairman: I appreciate exactly what you are saying there, but I really want to look forward.

Mrs. Newallo-Hosein: I am looking forward here. I am asking the question, with all that is happening now, what is the situation with students in the secondary schools pursuing vocational studies and, particularly, the CVQ? What is happening with those students because they too have now become marginalized and they have been also been put into a vulnerable grouping as well. Is the Ministry looking at all these aspects of training and particularly for the visually impaired because the visually impaired need a different type of teaching? How are we reaching those children?

Mr. Meyer: Perhaps I can answer that question. Now, I think first we have to step back and be very clear that our learning management system that we are using right now was conceptualized in November 2018. It was designed and built and it was completed in July 2019. At the same time, our Education Management Information

System followed the same developmental time and cycle. We had both systems completed in July 2019. At that point in time, the Ministry prioritized the Education Management Information System because one of the biggest problems we have is trying to manage the Ministry of Education in the absence of a proper MIS. So that is where our resources were pushed. We pushed it towards making sure all our schools were online, to making sure the EMS which is a very, very, very sophisticated system developed in-house and that is what we were pushing.

The LMS for want of a better word was put in a box. There are basic functionalities to the system and it does have some functions that allow hearing impaired, visually impaired to utilize, but it really was not being pushed, not because we did not want to, but because we have finite resources and most of the resources, the school supervisors, the curriculum officers, the teachers, the principals, they were primarily tasked towards getting our EMS fully functional. So when the COVID-19 crisis occurred, we took LMS out of a box and launched it live with very little training for even our techs, very little training for teachers and that is how we had to push that system forward.

To answer the specific question about the TVET, technical vocational courses, we recognize that this is a serious gap and we are looking very critically at virtual reality and augmented learning systems. We have had conversations with some members of the diaspora in the United States who have offered us some assistance and we have even started to look at how we can actually offer a TVET class using a VR system. We have started to test it. But, again, this is early stages, but we think that if we continue along that line we would actually be able to increase our lab times in a virtual environment. Because right now because of funding issues, we do have difficulties offering labs to students. Some students probably, if they are lucky, they get three labs a year. If you have a VR lab in a school, we can multiply the number of labs that you are actually able to offer. The VR technology has moved

significantly in the last five years, and we intend to leverage on that.

Mr. Chairman: All right. I am going to going to member Antoine who had his hand up and then Mrs. De Freitas. Member Antoine, go ahead please.

Mr. Meyer: Yes, sure.

Brig. Gen. Antoine: We are coming to the end of May. One of the questions asked by the Committee involved the CSEC and CAPE exams and a tentative date of June/July was given. We are now approaching the month of June. So, therefore, I would like to get an update as to where we are in terms of these exams and have we shifted to another date later in the year and then I have another follow up please.

Mr. Chairman: I guess that question goes to the Chief Education Officer Acting.

Mrs. Henry-David: Mr. Chair, the Ministry has taken a Note to Cabinet. Consequent on a meeting of COHSOD, the Caricom Heads of Government with Responsibility for Education, and coming out of that meeting a position was taken regionally to have the exams in the month of July and this consideration is before the Cabinet at present. Mrs. Newallo-Hosein would have asked about school-based assessments. At present, as we speak, the schools are making preparations to have the completion of those SBAs done within the time frame set by CXC.

Mr. Chairman: Member Antoine had a follow-up question. He said he did have a follow-up question. Member Antoine, go ahead please with your follow-up question.

11.20 a.m.

Brig. Gen. Antoine: Yes. Given that we are in the month of May going on into June, are we prepared—and this also goes to TTUTA—for exam in July given the time frame given the fact that we are now in phase two of opening back up Trinidad and Tobago, is that time frame realistic? And if so, would the schools be prepared for exams because we would then have to look at social distancing, a whole range of other issues would come into play that are not normal for examinations involving

young students.

Mrs. Henry-David: So, Mr. Chair, the Ministry has been in contact with the Ministry of Health who has given us guidelines, clear guidelines on how we are to proceed in terms of completing the SBAs as well as hosting the exams. We have asked our principals to look at the exam rooms to indicate to the Ministry how in terms of social distancing and keeping the children between six and eight feet apart from each other, how many rooms they would be using so that we will have information on the additional invigilators that would be required. The Ministry of Health has also advised that the schools are to be cleaned as they would normally be and that sanitization would take the form of the bleach and water solutions which will be applied. And we have also given our principals instructions on signage and as well as the PPE that is necessary and the protocols for entry into the school. And I think that we will be able to have those examinations as scheduled.

The Ministry is also in the process of providing the schools with equipment and cleaning supplies in order to facilitate preparation of the plant for the examinations. We are in luck in that the Forms 5 and 6 will be the only students on the compound so that in terms of social distancing we will have the whole school at our disposal.

Mr. Chairman: Just before I go to member Hosein, can we get a sense of if there is any change to the assessment format? I know I had read in the media that in addition to the school-based assessment system there is going to be a multiple choice and possibly an essay-type question in terms of the overall format of the examination. Has that been decided upon finally?

Mrs. Henry-David: The CXC is the hosting of the multiple choice paper one which is a normal part of the examination, and as well as the school-based assessments. For those subjects which do not have a school-based assessment, which would be French, Spanish and Visual Arts, they will be either assessing the portfolios that the

children had or those children will be required to sit a paper two. That is the proposal by the CXC.

Mr. Chairman: For the schools that do have school-based assessments in place, is the Ministry confident that these have been standardized? In the past there were concerns about the uniformity of those school-based assessments school to school in terms of the equal playing field of those assessments and its contribution to the students' final overall assessment.

Mrs. Henry-David: Okay. So in the past for previous years a percentage of the SBAs would have been moderated, I think that was 15 per cent but now we are going with 100 per cent for this particular circumstance. So that would increase the validity of the assessment.

Mr. Chairman: All right. Member Hosein.

Mrs. Newallo-Hosein: Thank you, Chair. Coming back to the issue of the exams—

Mr. Chairman: Member Hosein, can you move away from your device, please?

Mrs. Newallo-Hosein: Sorry.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much.

Mrs. Newallo-Hosein: My apologies. Concerning the decision to have it in July, did the Ministry at all consult with TTUTA and other stakeholders, including the 17 boards, and including NPTA and so forth, as to the date in July? Or has Trinidad and Tobago taken the decision that the other Caricom countries have decided on? That is just one question and then I will ask the other one.

Mr. Chairman: Mrs. Henry-David.

Mrs. Henry-David: So the Ministry has been in contact with numerous stakeholders throughout this process. The decision—

Mrs. Newallo-Hosein: Can you identify who they are?

Mrs. Henry-David: The different principals' associations; we have met with TTUTA a number of times; the association of denominational boards as well. Now,

CXC is a Caribbean-based exam, Trinidad and Tobago cannot dictate to the rest of the Caribbean countries what should happen. We had our position which our Cabinet would have agreed on—

Mr. Chairman: Or act in isolation.

Mrs. Henry-David: Right, act in isolation. So that there was voting when the COHSOD met and this was the proposal put forward at the end of the voting process. This was what was agreed on by the majority of the territories, to have the exam in July.

Mr. Chairman: Member Hosein, you had a follow-up?

Mrs. Newallo-Hosein: And of course it would impact everything else including the national scholarships. Will there be any changes in the policy regarding this award of national scholarships this year given the unprecedented challenges that are experienced in the academic year as a result of COVID-19?

Mr. Chairman: And if I could just add to that question, member Hosein to Mrs. Henry David, is there a system that the Education Ministry has put in place to do an analysis of whenever the exam takes place, the results for inconsistencies in students' performance that may be attributable to COVID-19 where students were on a particular trajectory and their trajectory changed after COVID-19, because it will impact significantly, the admission to universities, et cetera, moving forward, matriculation to other levels, et cetera?

Mrs. Henry-David: At the same COHSOD meeting there was representation from UWI and what was put forward at that time was that the matriculation, the entry into UWI would be based on level one exams that the students would already have done and then they would take the later—the exams that they will sit this year into consideration afterwards, but matriculation would be based on what the children have already done. In terms of assessments—

Mr. Chairman: So as opposed to the past, it is not going to be based in this exam

alone?

Mrs. Henry-David: Correct.

Mr. Chairman: So some level of their past performance would be included in that for more validity and reliability of what their assessment in the subject matters are?

Mrs. Henry-David: Right. So they would look at what they have done in the lower sixth exams, for example, rather than what is going to be done in July, because the exam results will come a little later on and if we were to wait for those results it would push back the universities in their students entering into their first year.

Mr. Chairman: All right. In terms of time management, can you give us a sense of what is happening with SEA?

Mrs. Henry-David: The SEA exam will be held one month after students have re-entered school and we are before the Cabinet currently with asking for—we have put forward a proposal and the Cabinet is considering it. So whenever school starts the idea is that the exam will be held one month thereafter.

Mr. Chairman: Can you give me a sense of the 68,000 students who do not have devices who may not have been exposed to guidance or curriculum, because I know in most cases they would have finished the bulk of the work heading to SEA? How many Standard 5 students who are eligible to sit SEA would be included in that, if you have that information, and may have been affected in the run-up to SEA?—because SEA, as CSEC, as CAPE, are standardized examinations that presume that all students had as equal a playing field heading into the examination, and we know that some students have been more adversely affected than others which may impact their assessment and determination of their competencies in the various disciplines.

Mr. Meyer: We have the information but we would need to collate that answer, so we could perhaps send that to you.

Mr. Chairman: I would appreciate that. Yes. I want to go back to the President of TTUTA in terms of the information that Mrs. De Freitas and her organization may

have been able to get, because we always say in education, as many of you would know, that parents and teachers are the primary interface for the learners and the feedback that you have been getting in terms of students who had behavioural issues before the pandemic, whose behavioural issues may have been exacerbated as a result of the pandemic and who may have developed behavioural issues and psychosocial issues in the face of the pandemic or trying to cope with the pandemic—and I will start with Mrs. De Freitas, that is in terms of what the teachers are saying and then I can go to Prof. Conrad in terms of what Student Support Services is getting in terms of possible reports. So Mrs. De Freitas, you first on that, please.

Mrs. Tekah-De Freitas: Thank you, Mr.Chair, but before I get into that questions were asked about the CVQ, the SBAs and CSEC, and they were not quite properly answered, so TTUTA would want the opportunity to provide—

Mr. Chairman: Absolutely, go ahead, please. Appreciate it.

Mrs. Tekah-De Freitas: Right. So should I start with that or should I answer this question?

Mr. Chairman: No, start with that first, please.

Mrs. Tekah-De Freitas: Okay. So in the first instance, Mr.Chair and colleagues, there was no discussion with TTUTA as far as the projection for the date for CSEC and CAPE examinations in July. Discussions came after that, we were informed of the Ministry's proposal thereafter. Two, in terms of the SBAs, member Hosein asked about the completion of the SBAs, the status of SBAs. A number of schools may have completed their SBAs and teachers may have uploaded the marks. There are a number of schools where the SBAs have not been completed, and it is not necessarily because we have not been able to reach out to the children because of the connectivity issues we mentioned before. One of the challenges is dependent on the subject, so going back, for example, to students doing Caribbean Vocational

Qualifications, the CVQ programmes, for example, garment construction; for example, furniture making, those are different from tech-voc subjects being done for CSEC. Yeah?

So the students doing CVQ, part of their verification comes from going into industry environments and completing it there, finishing their SBAs and then having the marks uploaded, and so forth. We have not been able to complete that, the National Training Agency (NTA) has not been able to complete that because obviously our organizations are closed, and given, as member Antoine said, given the phased reopening projected by the Government, there is no telling when those students would be to interact in that environment, because of course those organizations would want to first get their businesses up and running before they cater to students. So that is something they are looking at.

Additionally, there is an agency of CXC that deals specifically with the CVQ and their verification. That office is based in Jamaica. That office is closed right now because of stay at home measures there as well. So those are the factors as far as the CVQ goes. So we need to have the time.

The visual and performing arts subjects, many of the students may have completed some aspect of their proposal of their practical, however, for the SBAs, let us take music for example, for their SBAs, those students have composition arrangement pieces to finish and they would also have had performance pieces. These are things we need to do in school. Obviously they cannot be done at home, we do not have the capacity to do them at home; they have to be done in school interfacing with their teachers.

The students doing Technical Vocational Drawing at CSEC, let us say our class has 15 students, colleagues, and we are moderating, as the Acting CEO said, all samples—all items instead of a sample, that means all 15 students' pieces have to be looked at, they have to be viewed. But then we have to also print for viewing,

print their wide format documents because it is technical drawing they are doing, they are architectural drawing pieces, print the wide format documents in colour for review for moderation. That has to be done in school. So this is why we are saying as teachers, as TTUTA, some schools may be finished with SBAs, a number of our students are not. If we take the internal assessments at the CAPE level certain subjects, for example pure math and physics, they have a pencil and paper examination that must be administered; it has to be done face-to-face to contribute towards the IA.

So even if we presume that upon the reopening protocols that have been given, that we are going to sanitize and whatever, are we saying then that these children are going to be ready to move from stay at home measures directly into examination mood.

And that brings me therefore to the question that the Chairman has asked, the feedback from teachers, we have not gotten feedback from all teachers on this particular issue. The feedback from teachers is that in some instances, one, the behavioural issues, the challenges faced by some of our students have been exacerbated. A case in point, a teacher at an ECCE centre, now ECCE, they are simply being told to upload the lesson plans, not to upload activities and games, and so forth. So the parent is expected to follow the lesson plan, and that is a challenge in itself. The teacher has uploaded the lesson plan and the child in her class—she teaches the four-year-olds in the ECCE centre—the child in her class who has been diagnosed with mild autism is resisting the mother every single day. As far as that child is concerned the routine of getting up, getting ready and going to meet Miss has been disrupted and of course he does not understand why. The reality of COVID is not something that is there for him.

We have the situation of students in Form 6—of course they are studying their matriculation—case in point, top student, high-performing student, connected with

the teacher, going good and then all of a sudden the student dropped out. So in trying to get on to the student through peers eventually, the child is having severe anxiety attacks, not because he cannot do the exam, his mom is a nurse and he is anxious about what is happening. We have heard teachers who have taken the decision as a staff not to put the online engagement as a priority. Because of the community where they are, they have decided to do the pastoral care and the charity work. So on a weekly basis or a fortnightly basis, they make up 100, 150 hampers because that is what the students there, their families there need.

So we do not have statistical data, Mr.Chairman, as to how many students have been affected negatively, but based on the anecdotal records we are aware that there has been some fallout.

You asked a question about tracking, TTUTA realizes that is something we will have to do, track the performance of these children. Mr.Chairman, with your permission the 1st Vice President, Mr. Seales, he may be able to add more in terms of the SBAs and the CVQ, and so forth.

Mr. Chairman: Well, I am glad that you are bringing him in the conversation because we have had him sitting there for a while. Mr. Seales, you can join us. Please unmute your microphone.

Mr. Seales: Thank you for the opportunity. Again, TTUTA as an organization we are trying to be data-driven in our approaches. To reaching out to our members we would have done a survey in the past and asked our members about these questions concerning the SBAs, IAs and their ability to, while at the stay at home order, the ability to complete these assignments. A lot of our members, especially in the lower-performing schools have the motivation, the motivation of our students to engage in these platforms as a major hurdle. Case in point, one of our teachers, the students actually reached out to her as a TVET teacher, asking about the possibility of getting online past papers, doing multiple choice, seeing that that is now a major concern or

a major component of the exam, if they could get past multiple choice papers and answers, and the teacher actually did provide those documents to the students and the class. However, the follow through on behalf of students was not there.

So they were interested in being part of the process but they did not have the internal motivation to complete the process. All right. And for a lot of our students, again using Prof. Conrad's phrase of, we TTUTA being a social organization interested in social justice, we must look at those students who are in a disadvantaged situation, either not having the devices and can impact in the process at all, but also not having the support mechanisms to be able to follow through even when they have the devices on hand.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. Prof. Conrad, if you could answer the question that I asked earlier on, based on the possible behavioural issues being exacerbated by COVID-19, the psychosocial health of some students. I could give you an example, a friend of mine's 16-year-old son was a well-adjusted young man going to what is considered a prestige school in Port of Spain broke down and just started to cry two weeks ago, and he became so overwhelmed by the COVID-19 situation being lockdown at home, and he is a well performing student, well adjusted, generally happy young man and she reported to me, and she is not the only one—it may not be as extreme but he just started to cry, and she had to call a counsellor on the phone and walk him through it because she was really worried about her son's psychosocial welfare. What are the reports on that and students with behavioural issues going into COVID-19 that may have been exacerbated and students who were possibly affected so much by COVID-19 that they are now displaying behaviours that they may not have before? Could you unmute your mike, please?

Prof. Conrad: Yes, Mr. Chairman, we have had approximately 1,200 phone calls through our hotline and of the calls, the vast majority of the calls have actually been on issues of poverty, people looking for food cards; they need to know what supports

it—other than that we have seen a rise, we have had 50 cases of parents requesting counselling sessions with their children and of those 50 we have had the primary reason being increased withdrawal, concerns about sexual predators, students being anxious, and 75 critical incidents that centred on suicide ideation, drowning and either inexplicable withdrawal or aggression, which is not lasting for long but it reflects the frustration that our students are experiencing.

We have been using hotline services, we have been providing psycho-educational sessions online, targeting the management of anxiety, adjusting to new independent learning styles, as well as understanding a lot of the school learning management system. We have been providing virtual counselling which is something we are kind of—some psychologists—people on different levels on that continuum of how comfortable they are, because while you are trying to engage that learner, that child, that child's sense of space because there are other people in the house; there is probably one computer. So determining whether or not to tell them give you a call later, and of course there is also the issue of, should you give them your personal number, with some people I have been challenged by.

We also have working particularly in terms of creating more psychosocial sessions and giving students—I think, a key issue is allowing students or facilitating students' voice. Typically in our culture we silence students and this is a time when if they do not believe they are in an environment where they can actually say how they feel without being managed, it adds to the conflict. So we have been striving to deal with the increasing level of anxiety and the concern that often these children who will seek any means of escape, unfortunately some took places where it is compromising but they are going to rebel. So we have a reality where our resources are stretched, yes, but our officers are also learning, learning how to confine ways to engage our students.

Mr. Chairman: All right. We have like 15 minutes left in this session. Just before

I go to member Hosein, I would like to ask Mrs. De Freitas or any of her team if you have had reports of teachers undergoing psychological challenges during this time also.

Mrs. Tekah-De Freitas: Mr. Chairman, I would allow either the 1st VP or the General Secretary to offer their responses, but, yes, we have had some reports.

Mr. Chairman: Yes, if Ms. Beckles could handle that, if she is—

Ms. Beckles: Can you just repeat the question, please, sorry?

Mr. Chairman: The question is if you have had any reports from teachers, and your President also indicated, yes, you have, and the types of reports you have gotten from the teaching body in Trinidad and Tobago about psychological challenges, or emotional challenges they have experienced in this COVID-19 pandemic in the transition to trying to deal with it.

Ms. Beckles: Well, in particular reference to our teachers, they are trying. Those that are actually doing the online they may not be using the Ministry's platform but they are using their other platforms. Remember they are at home trying to manage the home environment. They themselves would have several children to look after, then their children would be receiving assignments from their teachers and then they are also experiencing device issues, because they may have one device. So it is a juggling of, you know, of them having to—so that is one of the issues. Some of them also, because of the stay at home, some of their spouses would have been laid off so then they are now dealing with—

Mr. Chairman: Their own personal challenges.

Ms. Beckles: Yes, their own personal challenges, and then having to juggle online which is new to most of them, and one of the challenges some of them experience was they actually try to take the classroom online. Now for online it is different, you cannot take a whole classroom and just drop it online, right. So it has been a lot of adjustments but I have been monitoring the various teachers' Facebook groups

and I have seen teachers helping teachers adjust to the new normal in terms of giving them ideas of what are some of the better resources to use, which are the easier to handle; holding their hand through some of the issues that they face, right. But they have also had the issues of parents, uncles, whoever, getting their contact information and sending inappropriate photos and comments to them, so these are all the things that they are juggling at this time.

Other issues that they experience is that, for example they have the WhatsApp group, children would be added to the group, they would come on, leave the group and the teacher complained, “Well, you only seeing dem posting status.” So the teacher assumed that they were having connectivity issues, but then she is seeing them online doing other things. So then as 1stVP said before, that internal motivation is not there and in most instances the parents are not monitoring—

Mr. Chairman: Well, there are supervision issues because not all home situations are the same.

Ms. Beckles: Yes.

Mr. Chairman: Member Hosein.

Mrs. Newallo-Hosein: Thank you, Chair. In the written submission that you had sent to us speaks about this as you are saying, one is that you had indicated to the Minister, the Deputy Permanent Secretary, the psycho-educational sessions, on page 3 you submitted, were being provided, and you also indicated that guidance officers connected with students with the consent of their parents, but when I looked at Appendix 1 some of the challenges which they were able to identify, that some of the persons did not want their telephone numbers in place. They did not want to— there was a cost attached to their own personal phones now, that they were incurring a cost and therefore it might not have been very feasible for a number of persons to be able to continue with the guidance. And so I am asking the question, what is being put in place for the guidance officers and social workers to be able to reach these

children and the teachers in a most efficient and effective manner? That is the first thing.

And, secondly, they cannot take away from the fact that if parents, as TTUTA indicated, if parents have lost their jobs and they do not have the ability to provide for their families, you would find that they will have that burden being placed on the children as well, because they do not have that ability. And in your Appendix I you showed us, in the various districts in Victoria, Saint Patrick, you indicated that there were eight food cards; in Saint Patrick, three; south-east, 11; Saint George East, 13; these are persons who have food cards of which children number 48 persons. And just recently the Minister indicated that there were 40,000 persons who are on food cards and therefore those 40,000 children who were removed from the system and therefore they were not able to receive the food card for children who access the school feeding. What are you doing in terms of, one, to increase guidance officers and providing a stipend in place so that they would be able to reach children and parents and teachers?

Is it that they are going to be given a device, a phone device that will be separate from their own personal one so they do not have to worry about their personal number getting out, and, two, the cost of a phone call? And secondly, will there be any recommendations being made from the Ministry to the Minister for additional or the recommencement of the distribution of food cards to parents who are in dire need and who have been left out because the fact that the Government took a decision to stop the food card programme because of this perception that 40,000 persons out there already have food cards? But based on your Appendix 1, we only have 48 persons who have food cards, which I know might be understated.

11.50 a.m.

Mr. Chairman: Mr. Meyer, can you answer that? Is it directed at Mr.Meyer? Mr.Meyer, go ahead please.

Mr. Meyer: All the information that we collect in terms of the children who are in need will be passed on to the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. We are in a crisis right now. We are trying as best as we can to manage. We know that for some children this is a difficult situation in terms of school was a sanctuary for them, where they were fed, there are people who would listen to them, they could talk to somebody, and they have lost that. And as good as the online platform is, it cannot replace that direct contact. Once we identify that there are children who need extra services in terms of even the food card, we will pass the information on to the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. I think Dr. Conrad will have some more details on this.

Mr. Chairman: Go ahead please, Prof. Conrad.

Prof. Conrad: Mr. Chair, only to advise the learned representative that Appendix I does not refer to guidance officers nor to social workers. It really applies to special education teachers who are out there. They do not have the same privilege as guidance officers, and so yes some of them are challenged in terms of the use of their phones, and things like that.

Mr. Chairman: I am going to go to member Antoine who has been waiting a while, and then member Hosein with one final quick question, and then we will go to closing comments from the stakeholder heads, please. Member Antoine, go ahead please. Unmute your microphone please. Go ahead, you are unmuted.

[Technical issue]

Member Antoine, could you repeat the question please? We just want to unmute your microphone properly. We were not hearing the start of your question. Right, go ahead now please; thank you.

Brig. Gen. Antoine: I want to go back to SEA, CSEC and CAPE, because these exams are inevitable. It is something that will happen in the near or distant future. And a new category that would be introduced because of COVID-19, that would be

students who on the day of the exam may show flu like symptoms or allergy, and as a result would not be able to participate in the exam. What provisions are being put in place both for the student? And because of the impact it would have on the family for those who are unable to sit the exam on that day and may have to sit at a later date, what would be the time frame between the exam day and when these students who demonstrate flu like symptoms or allergies will have to re-sit the exam, and what could be put in place for the student and their parents, given the kind of impact it will have on them and the community?

Mr. Chairman: That is the Education Ministry, so I am presuming—yes thank you, go ahead.

Mrs. Henry-David: Mr. Chair, with respect to children exhibiting flu like symptoms—

Mr. Chairman: Could you move back from your camera a little bit please.

Mrs. Henry-David: Sorry.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you.

Mrs. Henry-David: What we are looking at is for example those children who have allergies which may result in flu like symptoms, we are hoping that it will be possible that the parents would take them to the health centre and get some sort of medical, so that they would not be debarred from their examinations. However, persons without a medical who come on to the compound during the examination times will be debarred and will have to come back with some sort of medical.

Also the Ministry of Health has advised that we should screen students by asking them their medical history for the past two weeks before allowing them on to the school compound as a matter of precaution.

Mr. Chairman: Is that also going to include the medical history of possibly their family members in the same household?

Ms. Henry-David: Yes, yes, within the two-week period.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you.

Ms. Henry-David: With respect to SEA, there is normally a make-up examination, so that whenever the exam is held, I think it is about six weeks later there will be a make-up. Six to eight weeks later there will be a make-up examination. With respect to CXC-based exams that would of course depend on when CXC is next able to host exams which may very well be the January sitting.

Mr. Chairman: Member Hosein, quick question before we give the final comments, because we just really have four minutes.

Mrs. Newallo-Hosein: Thank you. Okay I am going to hit three questions in less than four minutes.

Mr. Chairman: No, you actually have two minutes to pose the question, because they have to answer it.

Mrs. Newallo-Hosein: The Blind Welfare had indicated that they need the services of Anil Waite in order to have their online services for their students, to be effective. Without him being able to do so they are disadvantaged on a numerous scale. What is it that the Ministry intends to do concerning that aspect? Also, I do not understand how you could bring online services via radio. I mean, particularly when we have a society where the children are very visual oriented, would radio not put additional pressure onto our children? Those basically are my two questions, and thanks again.

Mr. Meyer: In terms of the online services by radio, we were going with radio because we were trying as best as possible to give as wide access, because there are certain families that do not have a television, they do not have Internet, so we thought radio was at least one other avenue, which is why we were pursuing that. It is not our best choice, but we have to explore all possibilities.

In terms of, I think it is the Blind Welfare in terms of the accessibility to the LMS, as I mentioned before we have been implementing LMS actively. There was no pilot for it. So we went live and we are reviewing all aspects of the platform, and

we do have some parts of the platform that can aid in the blind, visually impaired, but we are trying to increase the services to the entire platform. That is all I can say on that at this point in time.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. In the last two minutes I am going to give first Mrs. De Freitas closing comments please and then Mr. Meyer, the Acting Permanent Secretary in the Education Ministry. So Mrs. De Freitas, the floor is yours.

Mrs. Tekah-De Freitas: Mr. Chair, thank you very much. Thank you very much to Committee members for having us here today. TTUTA wants to give the assurance that in the interest of our children, in the interest of the sustainability of our nation we remain committed to working together with all stakeholders. We would want to seek permission to present our written submissions subsequent to today's discourse, and we look forward to partnering closely as I mentioned in the interest of everyone. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you so much. Mr. Meyer, Acting Permanent Secretary, and if the Chief Education Officer also has a closing comment, that would be fine too. So we go to Mr. Meyer first. Could you unmute your mike, please. Thank you.

Mr. Meyer: Again, I would like to take this opportunity, I think, to thank the teachers, principals, curriculum officers for the yeoman service they have done in the last three months. It has been an extremely challenging time, and I think the staff of the Ministry of Education, given our many, many constraints, has performed admirably and I think we need to recognize that. I would like to thank the Committee for giving us this opportunity, and we will be reviewing all of our systems in the hope that we can improve our online offering. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you both, and I will just like to invite you also to feel free to commit your thoughts and your additional information to paper or to digital format, and send it to our Secretariat. We will really appreciate it.

We would like to thank Mr. Kurt Meyer, Acting Permanent Secretary in the

Education Ministry, also Mrs. Lisa Henry-David, Acting Chief Education Officer and Prof. Dennis Conrad, the Director of Student Support Services Division; and also from TTUTA, the Trinidad and Tobago Unified Teachers' Association, Mrs. Antonia Tekal De Freitas, the President, Mr. Marlon Seales, the 1st Vice-President and Ms. Kady Beckles, the General Secretary.

On behalf of the Committee members, member Christine Newallo-Hosein, member Ancil Antoine and the others members of the Committee who are not with us today, we would like to thank you all for being with us.

We will also like to advise the public that the following report of the Committees were recently presented to the Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago and are available for review on the Parliament website at tparliament.org, which is the Thirteenth Report of the Committee on the enquiry to the prevalence of teenaged pregnancy and the State's capacity the occurrence of teenaged pregnancy, and to provide services and assistance to teenaged pregnancy.

We would like to thank you all for viewing and listening. On behalf of Committee members, thank you for viewing and be safe out there.

Thank you all, we are suspended. We would like to thank the stakeholders for taking part and we look forward to your submissions digitally to our Secretariat. Thank you once again for your contributions. We would invite you to leave the chat now, and we are going to have a quick in-camera with the rest of the Committee to discuss our next meeting. Thank you all again and be safe out there.

11.58 a.m.: *Meeting suspended.*

APPENDIX V

VERBATIM NOTES OF THE THIRTY-NINTH VIRTUAL MEETING OF THE SOCIAL SERVICES & PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION COMMITTEE HELD IN PUBLIC ON FRIDAY, JUNE 05, 2020, AT 10.16 A.M.

PRESENT

Mr. Paul Richards	Chairman
Mr. Esmond Forde	Vice-Chairman
Mrs. Christine Newallo-Hosein	Member
Brig. Gen. Ancil Antoine	Member
Ms. Khadijah Ameen	Member
Mr. Julien Ogilvie	Secretary
Mr. Johnson Greenidge	Assistant Secretary
Ms. Aaneesa Baksh	Graduate Research Assistant
Ms. Nicole Brown	Parliamentary Intern

ABSENT

Mrs. Glenda Jennings-Smith	Member
Mr. Rohan Sinanan	Member
Ms. Allyson West	Member

National Primary Schools Principals' Association of Trinidad and Tobago

Mr. Lance Mottley	President
Ms. Paula Kalkman	Vice President

Association of Public Secondary Schools Principals' Association (APPSST&T)

Mr. Ronald Mootoo	President
Mrs. Sherra Carrington- James	1 st Vice-President (Tobago Representative)

Presbyterian Primary Schools' Board of Education (PPSBOE)

Mrs. Geeta Kalapnath Maharaj General Secretary

Mr. Vickram Ramlal Advisor to the Board

Presbyterian Secondary Schools' Board of Education

Mr. Joel Bajnath Chairman

ASJA Board of Education (ASJABOE)

Ms. Affieza Ogeer General Secretary of the Education
Board

Mr. Rahimool Hosein General Secretary of ASJA
Incorporated

Catholic Education Board (CEBM)

Ms. Sharon Mangroo Chief Executive Officer

Mrs. Ayanna Nero Senior Operations Manager

Support Autism Trinidad and Tobago

Dr. Radica Mahase Founder/Director

Down Syndrome Family Network

Ms. Lisa Ghany Honorary Board Member

Mr. Chairman: Hello and welcome to the viewing and listening audience to this the Thirty-Ninth Meeting of the Joint Select Committee of Social Services and Public Administration. I am the Committee's Chairman, Paul Richards. Thank you for joining us. This is the Committee's second virtual hearing, convened by this Committee and the Committee's second hearing with stakeholders pursuant to its enquiry into the Ministry of Education's strategies for ensuring continuity of delivery of education services amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our first hearing was held on Friday, May 22nd, with officials from the Ministry of Education and TTUTA. Members of the public are invited to submit their comments via the Parliament's social media platforms, YouTube channel

ParlView, or via Facebook or Twitter. We will be happy to factor those comments and questions into our conversation with our stakeholders.

We just have some guidelines we would like to outline for our virtual meeting, reminding our participants—and there are many participants in this interface—that the virtual meeting requires certain specifications. Please ensure that your microphone is muted if you are not speaking or making a contribution to help in keeping our background noises to a minimum because we understand that you are at various locations, including your houses and your offices, so if you can help us with that. Also, adjust your camera so that your face is framed in the centre of the frame so that we have a proper presentation to the viewing audience and ensure at this time that notifications on your cell phone or any other electronic device in your vicinity are muted during the course of this interface.

At this time, I would like to introduce our members. As I said before, I am the Chairman of the Committee and the members of the committee in whole: Mr. Esmond Forde, Mrs. Glenda Jennings-Smith, Brig. Ret. Ancil Antoine, Mrs. Christine Newallo-Hosein, Mr. Rohan Sinanan, Ms. Allyson West, and Ms. Khadijah Ameen. With us today are members Ret. Gen. Antoine, member Christine Newallo-Hosein, and member Ameen. I would like them at this time to introduce themselves, ladies. Starting with member Newallo-Hosein.

[Introductions made]

Mr. Chairman: And I know we have member Ameen with us. Oh, she is not with us yet. Okay, she would be joining us in process. At this time, I would like to invite members of the stakeholders to please introduce themselves, starting with the officials of the National Primary Schools Principals' Association. Do remember to unmute your mike before you make your presentation, please. We are starting with Mr. Mottley, please introduce yourself and the other stakeholders from the National Primary Schools Principals' Association.

[Introductions made]

Ms. Mangroo: Good morning, I think you mean the Chief Executive Officer. We no longer have a General Secretary.

Mr. Chairman: I apologize, go ahead, please.

[Introductions continued]

Mr. Chairman: Thank you, and finally from the Down Syndrome Family Network.

Mrs. Ghany: *[Inaudible]*

Mr. Chairman: Could you repeat that please, Mrs. Ghany?

[Introductions continued]

Mr. Chairman: Thank you all very much. As you can see, it is quite a large group of stakeholders today but we really wanted to include as many voices as possible because your experiences are so varied in so many different ways. Let me just start by advising that when we met with the Education Ministry and TTUTA last week, what was discovered was that because of the unexpected, of course, onset of the pandemic and the fact that the State officials, the Government officials had to enact lifesaving restrictions on Trinidad and Tobago in every particular sector, including restricting movements and basically bringing the country to a halt to contain the spread of the virus, many sectors including the education sector was significantly affected. And it was important to us, as a committee, to find out what the challenges were that were being faced, and how we, as a committee, could glean this information into a cohesive report to present to the Ministry and other stakeholders with a view of mitigating many of the challenges faced, and also, to providing the kind of interventions that were needed to ensure that the stakeholders, in particular, the young people, the ECCE students, and the primary and secondary school students were provided with some sort of interventions in a situation that will never be perfect, but certainly we can move in a way that can help these students bridge the gaps that have been elicited by the pandemic and the restrictions that the

Government has had to put in place.

And with that said, we would like to start with the National Primary Schools Principals' Association and its President to give us an overview on what your experience has been like. And we would like to keep the contribution as succinct as possible. So we start with Mr. Mottley and that.

Mr. Mottley: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. The National Primary Schools Principals' Association, we have been engaging in a number of discussions among our members in a number of areas to ensure that our students, particularly in terms of engaging our students, to ensure that our students are kept occupied. The Ministry of Education would have engaged us over the period to assist it in getting our teachers on board, et cetera, et cetera. But the challenge—and you know, the only challenge with that is that one, a number of students were not able to access the Ministry of Education's SLMS platform as well as other platforms that other teachers might have been using out there. So, they did not have the access—many of our students did not have the access or do not have the access to devices on one hand, and secondly, to Internet access as well. So those were the challenges that we would have encountered when we sought to engage our students out there.

So that is one area, I do not know how far you want me to go but—

Mr. Chairman: You can continue. What are the other areas?

Mr. Mottley:—they created quite a number of different scenarios. So one scenario would have been to ensure that our students are engaged. Another scenario would be—and we are moving forward now—to determine how our new school environment would be, and perhaps maybe later on, we can develop that. And another scenario, of course which seems to be one of the major topics out there, is about SEA. So we have opinions on all of these—

Mr. Chairman: We are coming up to the SEA and CSEC and CAPE.

Mr. Mottley: [*Inaudible*]*—how far you want me to go—*

Mr. Chairman: Later—we are coming up to SEA and CSEC later on, so we would deal with that. Let me go to Mr. Mootoo, the President of the Association of Principals of Public Secondary Schools and what your experience has been.

Mr. Mootoo: Good morning to everyone. Let me say thank you very much once again. Just to say that we as principals have very, very much engaged in the transition from face-to-face learning to online learning. Our experiences have been— there is a lot of difficulty really with the online learning, a number of challenges which I know we will cover in due course. But I also want to say that some and many experiences have been very rewarding.

For the secondary schools, CAPE and CSEC exams were very much uppermost in our minds, and we have been doing all we can to facilitate the hosting of these. I want to say that we as principals have been ourselves learning of the online platforms and the various methodologies of online teaching. We have held workshops with our teachers, we have done numerous meetings with our teachers, in some instances with parents and, of course, online teaching. I want to say in that respect too that APPSST&T held its vacation workshop online, a historic online workshop this year with over 150 participants. I want to plug in also that I am also the President of the Caribbean Association of Principals of Secondary Schools and I have been having numerous virtual meeting with the Caribbean principals and, in fact, we have ongoing an online training with Caribbean teachers and principals towards the transition into online teaching and learning.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you so much. Let us go to the Presbyterian Primary Schools' Board of Education. Mrs. Geeta Maharaj, what has your experience been in the round?

Mrs. Maharaj: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Chairman: Mrs. Maharaj?

Mrs. Maharaj: Can you hear me now?

Mr. Chairman: Yes, we are hearing you now, go ahead please.

Mrs. Maharaj: At this point, I would allow Mr. Ramlal to make the presentation here.

Mr. Chairman: Not a problem. Mr. Ramlal.

Mrs. Maharaj: Is that all right with you, Sir?

Mr. Chairman: That is fine. Thank you. Mr. Ramlal, go ahead please.

Mr. Ramlal: Good morning again to members of the Joint Select Committee. The Presbyterian Primary Schools' Board of Education's experience has been a fairly difficult one. Like Mr. Mottley indicated, we had a lot of issues concerning Internet connectivity for both students and teachers, the lack of devices for students and teachers, and even many of our teachers lack the technological skills to effectively do online teaching. What we found many of our teachers and principals used was the WhatsApp platform to communicate with the parents and students. The students with special needs and the students who are challenged had a lot of difficulty being reached because you did not have the one on one and face to face that they would normally get in the school setting, so that was another issue.

The Board was unable to help our students with technological devices, or even our teachers. But when we interfaced with our schools, bread and butter issues seemed to be the more important issues. Students were not getting the food support and the food card that they had expected. So a lot of our energies from our principals and teachers was expended on trying to provide the basic for our students.

One of the things that happened as well is when TTUTA, in their work from home policy, indicated that the work of teachers during this period was voluntary, a lot of teachers then took a different approach and accountability became an issue. But they were saying if they were working voluntarily, then there was no need to really account, and that created some problems. We feel that the period covered has not been very effective. There were no systematic programmes being used, so

teachers were doing different things. Some were doing enrichment and remedial exercises, some were doing curriculum. The one area that people really tried to stick to the curriculum and do work was the SEA classes.

We also believe that the figure quoted by the Ministry of Education of 68 to 70,000 students being without devices might be a little low. Our figure probably looks at about 90,000. And as a result, we feel that the programme has not been very effective in terms of reaching our students during this period, and we foresee that when school reopens in September, our teachers and principals will have to do a lot of diagnostic work to see exactly where our students are.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much. Let us go to the—thank you very much, Mr. Ramlal. Let us go to Mr. Bajnath of the Presbyterian Secondary Schools' Board of Education for your overview of what your experience has been so far.

Mr. Bajnath: Most of the schools, under our purview, have done well so far. They have communicated with their students very well. However, some of the problems they have encountered is feedback from the students and some of the students, they are not all present during the online classes. They utilized most of the online system already so it is nothing new to our schools in doing work with the students. But as I said, some of it is attendance and feedback from the students. Students are—not all the students are complying with assignments. As such, those are some of the concerns we have.

Also, with regard to the reopening back of the schools, especially now where we have the SBAs being done and the exams will be held shortly, there are some concerns with some HSE issues that, you know, needs to be addressed, especially with the sanitization. But they already have systems in place, we already have systems in place and that is taking place. With regard to each student getting attention, they are constantly being monitored by the VPs and the deans who are being supervised by principals, and doing their regular checks to ensure that proper

curriculum activities have been covered. Most of the curriculum have been covered before—90 per cent, 95 per cent have been covered before the pandemic hit, so it was not a big, major problem for us completing anything.

There were minor instances where a few students were unable to access electronic devices for completing SBAs and the schools stepped in, together with consultation with the family, and laptops were provided or access to laptops were made so that these children could complete their SBAs. Financially preparing, due to this epidemic, have taken a little toll on the resources in the school and that seems to be a minor problem that we would need some assistance in.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you so much. Let us go the ASJA Board of Education and the General Secretary of the Education Board. Ms. Ogeer, please. Ms. Ogeer, go ahead please.

Ms. Ogeer: Some of the challenges our teachers faced were that some of the students were not ready for online teaching and learning, including the teachers who are not very savvy in the technology. Some of them did not have computers and there was no standardized scheme of work and guidelines, so teachers focused on revisions and some bit of new teaching. Also, with regard to the psychological, teachers were more interfacing with students as the need be and as contacted, the organization in itself focus more on survival of most of our stakeholders, so there was not much injection into our schools.

The readiness for reopening of schools, there is a lot of work. We heard that the Minister said that the Ministry of Health would be assisting in sanitizing schools for the reopening. Unfortunately, we have not seen any help coming to our schools. So the principals are doing the best that they can to accommodate the upcoming exams. Also, there would be financial implications to satisfy all the needs of the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Health as we go forward with regard to social distancing and all the hygiene. So we are awaiting communication from the Minister

as to how the board schools will be assisted.

Important is safety. As we see in most of the institutions, we have the thermal testing, how would this be done? Is it that people would just walk in, who would be doing this? So, safety in our schools will be of paramount importance. We are suggesting that all schools should have safety officers who would be able to assist in these areas. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you so much and let us go the CEO of the Catholic Education Board to give a sense of how the schools under your purview have been coping during the pandemic.

Ms. Mangroo: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. As I start, I want to congratulate the Parliament, the Committee, on bringing us all stakeholders together because I think it is really very important that we speak to each other and that we hear from each other. Soon after the schools were closed, the Archbishop Jason Gordon called together our principals and teachers through a series of virtual meetings. We spoke with teachers and principals and asked them what they needed? His grace shared with them his concerns about continuing education, and what the research says about children who are left unattended for long periods of time, and the big concern was regression. So having asked teachers what they needed, we then started to put in place whatever mechanisms we could to fulfil the needs of teachers and principals.

At the secondary level, he also met with the IT technicians from the secondary schools. We then proceeded to provide some training for our principals and our teachers, and as most of the other speakers have said, we continue to engage our students using the Internet and our teachers were using a variety of platforms. We also collaborated with the Ministry of Education to provide lessons for television. At the time, the Ministry was focusing on SEA classes and our concern was the students from Infants to Standard 4. So, we have actually started production with airing those programmes on TTT as the Open Classroom.

We also started to produce print material in the *Catholic News* for those students who would not be able to access the Internet or the television. We noticed that a number of students did not have either Internet connectivity or devices, and this is common to what most countries in Latin America, the Caribbean, and even some European countries have been reporting. Same issues—my colleagues here have reported the same issues.

We attempted to provide devices. The Archbishop put out a call for people to donate used devices, and so far, we have distributed some 58 devices to teachers and a large number to students as well. We have also been able to assist some students in getting data because while we found that most people have cell phones and many teachers were using WhatsApp as the means of communicating with parents and teachers—yes, they have their cell phones but often they could not afford sufficient data to be able to spend a long time on the phone as was needed for the lessons.

As other people have reported, teachers' communication with the students, in most cases, it was WhatsApp and that was the preferred means. But they have been using a variety of other platforms. Many of our students—as you may know, many of our schools are in rural areas. Some of them are in areas that are severely challenged. So many of our students needed help, their families needed help, bread and butter sort of help. And our schools rose to the challenge where students did not receive cards to gain assistance—food cards—we are able to raise funds or get donations in other ways to provide for those families.

We have had a number of teachers as well as students who needed psychosocial support because some teachers have been severely impacted as well, psychologically. Teachers—we have been able to provide that support either through teachers referring their students to the Ministry of Education, or through support provided at a parish level, or through the Archdiocese hotlines. The same thing has happened with our teachers. The teachers primarily tend to go to the

Archdiocese hotline or to the support that we provide by the parishes.

We have offered to collaborate with the Ministry of Education in any way that we can to continue reaching all of our students. A big concern as we look to opening in September—

[Member Forde joins meeting]

Mr. Chairman: I want to ask you to put a pause there because we are going to get to some of those concerns in a short while. Thank you very much, Ms. Mangroo, who is the CEO of the Catholic Education Board. We would also like to member Forde who is the Deputy Chair of the Committee. Member Forde, thank you for joining us this morning.

Mr. Forde: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Sorry to be late but I am here. I will enter in when I need to.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you so much and thank you, member Forde. And we would like to go—although they have certainly a different experience and may have different challenges, we have also invited two principals in two special needs organizations in Trinidad and Tobago. Now let us start with Lisa Ghany, in terms of the Down Syndrome Family Network and what the experience of your members has been through this pandemic. Ms. Ghany.

Ms. Ghany: *[Inaudible]*—experience has really shown up very much the inequalities in our society regarding children with disabilities and in particular, children with intellectual disabilities. These children, on the main part many of them were not able even before the pandemic to access education in the inclusive term of education. And so, therefore, they did not enjoy quality learning on the same level or equal basis as the typical children.

During the pandemic, many of the issues that we have heard so far this morning have also relate to children with intellectual disabilities. However, you know, there is the additional challenge of face-to-face learning which is very

instrumental in many of the cases and the need for individual education plans which many of our children, as I said, do not have access to, as you know, in this normal state of affairs. So, the issues of lack of Internet access apply, in addition to the need for physical therapy, speech therapy, and other types of occupational therapy.

Nutrition also would be another aspect where food cards and so on, and social service grants were not immediately accessible or done in an efficient manner. Some families are still waiting for the grants that were promised. Student Support Services and some of the other services. They have reached out to some parents. In our network, we do have a WhatsApp family group for Trinidad that has 101 families on it and in Tobago, we have 25. And we have been keeping in touch with through these WhatsApp groups and asking them to provide feedback. Many were contacted—when I say “many”, I can relate to about five of them who were contacted early in March and who never had any other follow up regarding how they were doing, and did they need anything, but you know, that was an initial call that never had an outcome.

In addition, the families may have only one laptop and therefore, the typical child will get privileged over the child with the intellectual disability in the use of the laptop, while you know, during class time as well. Again, parent support, you know, someone mentioned the psychosocial impact and in this case, you know, in many cases, the parents require psychosocial support as well because they are dealing with the whole family and not only the child with the disability. And of course, there is a big disparity between the support given by private schools where we do have some children enrolled in private schools. In typical schools, the type of support that they get versus the type of support that the children who are attending public schools are getting as well, regarding lesson plans, face-to-face teacher time, even with an assistant teacher and the amount of actual class interaction that they have.

So, I think that is basically where we are at. Some of them are using different applications, Seesaw, Moodle, Google Classroom, and YouTube channels, and the network has also posted a variety of different learning tools which we can access through our international partners. We have put that on our Facebook, our website, and we share it with the parents on our WhatsApp chat as well, so that they can create their own lesson plans for their kids, because we also urge them to not leave this time unattended but to get their children into a routine and set up home classroom where they can have some sort of structure in their day.

11.00 a.m.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much, Ms. Ghany, and last and by no means least the Founder and Director of Autism Trinidad and Tobago whom I know has a large membership, Dr. Radica Mahase. Dr. Mahase, what has been the experience of your membership?

Dr. Mahase: So good morning to everyone, to all members. I want to start off by telling you that we did a short survey of 140 children who were registered with Support Autism T&T, and out of that about 140 children only 14 are attending a government school; 53 are attending a private school for special needs children; and the other 72 children are currently not attending a school, and this is before the whole COVID situation happened.

Out of the 14 children who are attending the government school we did some feedback—we got some feedback from the parents, and most of them, 10 of them have been literally—stopped doing work since the schools have closed. And this is because, the higher functioning ones were able to manage the online learning platform but the others who are mostly visual learners they did not find that the online learning platform was very stimulating to them, because most of the activities on the online learning platform or that were sent by their teachers, were worksheets and so on and they were not able to sit and do those.

Now, we also have many parents who are not in a—because of educational background and so on, are not in a position to sit and do the work with their children. They would normally depend on the teachers or the teachers' aides. So because the teachers and the teachers' aides do not have that interactive sessions with the students right now they have literally stopped learning.

Three of the students did not have access to devices or connectivity, but this was resolved because they reached out to various different organizations who helped them. We also had students who had problems as Ms. Ghany said with nutrition, and we stepped in as an NGO and we were distributing food supplies to them. We also recently received a grant that will help us to help those children with their medical supplies and supplements and so on.

So, we have been trying to reach out to them, but in terms of the learning environment, they are at a big disadvantage. And as Ms. Ghany said, this whole COVID situation has shown up the inequalities in in special needs education because while the higher functioning children with autism can still try to get some work done the lower functioning ones have no kind of assistance at present. And those who are in private schools, not because they were in private schools meant that they continue getting an education. Only 22 of those of the 53 who attend a private school continued. For the others, 50 per cent could not afford to continue paying the school fees, because parents were unemployed.

So the situation for children with autism is not a very nice one right now and we are really hoping that the Ministry can step in at some point and something more done for them. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much, Dr. Mahase. I am going to open the floor now to member Hosein and then member Antoine because at the end of their chomping had a bit questions for all of you stakeholders. Member Hosein, the floor is yours.

Mrs. Newallo-Hosein: Thank you very much, Chair. There are so many questions, but I am going to start with the support. In many submissions, our principals indicated and reported that many of our students in need did not receive food card support, and there were many cases—a lot of requests that will in fact convoluted and I would like to find out from perhaps the Presbyterian Board or the Catholic Board perhaps if you can indicate, what is the estimated actual number of eligible students within your schools who did not receive food support and really what transpired that led to this situation here.

Mr. Chairman: Maybe we can start with the Presbyterian Board on that please, secondary schools and then primary schools, and then the Catholic Board.

Mr. Bajnath: Yes, the Presbyterian Board experience, approximately only 20 per cent of our students received assistance. Principals were bombarded by parents indicating that they have not received the food card and that they needed assistance. So the board through our principals and various stakeholders we provided support, and recently our churches, when we received the grant from Government or religious bodies, we were also able to provide some support to our students, but many, many students and parents complained that they did not get the food card.

Mr. Chairman: When you said 20 per cent, is it 20 per cent of the students originally registered to receive food intervention at the schools or is it 20 per cent overall students?

Mr. Bajnath: Twenty per cent of the students registered to receive food support by the schools. There was some disparity in that in some districts the principals were asked to cut the lists and supply names of the most needy students, whereas in some districts, educational districts, they supplied the entire lists. The lists were then sent from the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Social Development, and then to the Members of Parliament. So some Members of Parliament were claiming they had a list of almost 2,000 children and they got 500 food cards to distribute.

So we have schools that had about 100 children on the list and maybe five or 10 students got food cards and then later on they got some food hampers, but it was not what was expected. It created quite a bit of problems for our principals who were constantly bombarded by parents asking, “Why we did not receive food cards?”

I think the problem came about very early when the Minister of social development made the announcement. There was the impression that all parents who were not already receiving food cards but were on the school feeding list were going to get a food card. And later on the Government policy changed to the more needy students. So as a result, there was a gap there and did create a problem.

Mr. Chairman: Let us go to the Catholic Board on that and then ASJA please.

Ms. Mangroo: Mr. Chairman, our experience is similar and what contributed to a bit of the confusion was the instructions that came to principals were conflicting, so that in some cases, principals were asked to supply the entire list of students who were accessing food nutrition and in others they were asked to choose. One principal has—

Mr. Chairman: On what basis are the principals been asked to choose? How does one determine who is more needy? Is there a matrix applied?

Ms. Mangroo: I do not think that was a matrix applied and as one principal described a situation he said, they were given 24 hours, he had a list of 211 students, and in 24 hours he had to go through that list and determine who was more deserving. The list was not totally up to date, because as he said, some family circumstances would have changed and particularly given the COVID situation some circumstances would have changed, drastically.

Again, there were—there was miscommunication between the various organizations because in some cases people were given the food cards based on their residence, and in other cases based on the area in which the school was located. So there was a great deal of confusion. Like my Presbyterian colleague I think it would

be less than 20 per cent of the people who were registered who actually received food cards.

We were able to make up for that by various means in the parishes, noting of course that not all students who attend our schools are Catholic. In fact, less than half the students who attend Catholic schools are Catholic. But those who could have access, the parishes did, those who could access the hotline did, but the schools, to a large extent, were able to gather resources to be able to distribute to those students who—

Mr. Chairman: Before I go to ASJA, how much did the subvention to religious organizations help in that gap, that shortfall?

Ms. Mangroo: I will not be able to answer that because the Catholic Education Board of Management is not part of the organization for handling that subvention.

Mr. Chairman: All right, let us go to ASJA and then we can go to the National Primary Schools Principals and the National Public School Secondary Principals to get a sense from their perspectives, how that food intervention situation was handled? So we can go to ASJA first please.

Mr. Hosein: We have had similar experience with the food cards and the needy students in our schools. But by and large, even before the Government announced the food cards and the subvention to the religious denominational Boards, organizations for the food hampers, we had private individuals associated with ASJA coming forward and preparing hampers for distribution to the schools.

In addition to that, we have had one individual donating almost 500 hampers to our schools. We have had another individual in the Charlieville area distributing to the seven primary schools that is under the stewardship of ASJA and they gave hampers to the schools also.

In addition, the subvention that the Government gave to each religious denominational, that went a long way also in alleviating the shortfall. Those who

did not get we were ensured that they would have gotten it. But the challenge was similar. I do not think—I am pretty sure that there may have been one or two who we were unable to reach, and we are hoping with the second tranche that the Government has intended to give out that we would be able to reach them. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: And just before we go to the principals' associations, we would like to put on the record, we did also extend an invitation to the Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha to send a representative, they acknowledge receipt of the invitation but did not choose to send a representative. So we can go to the National Primary Schools Association, and also the Association of Principals for Public Secondary Schools, in terms of what your experiences have been with member Hosein's question about the food intervention and nutrition aspect, with the pandemic. So we can go to Primary Schools Association first please.

Mr. Mottley: Okay thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Well, the experiences have been similar actually, we think that there was a lot of confusion with respect to the communique coming out from the Ministry of Education. We were told the Minister of Education was handling the—was assisting the Ministry of Community Development. I suppose there might have been some mixed communication between both Ministries. But the information coming to principals was very confusing at one time. At one time they were asking—they had asked us to provide the list of all of the students who were on the school feeding list, and we got the impression, I cannot recall if it was said or if it was insinuated, that the students who were on the school feeding list would be given—their parents would be given a food card.

And at other times, some principals, not all by the way, some principals or some districts were told that only a selected few children, would be selected for food cards and principals were required to determine who those children would be.

Again, so the information—it was not across the board. It was not across Trinidad and Tobago, it was very mixed and very confusing, and it led to a lot of bungling in terms of gathering the data, and the kinds of data that the Ministry of Education or the Ministry of Social Development would have wanted. That may have contributed towards the food card distribution not reaching the correct people, but even so, even so, the feedback that we have been getting, that we got from our principals, is that some schools, in some schools, very few children got food cards, very few—or parents I should say, got food cards, in some cases, about five, and in some cases maybe would have been more.

We do not know what the criteria that would have been used to select these children, but we were asked to provide the list and that is what we did. We recognized that some private sector—that the private sector would have intervened in terms of providing food support to some schools, et cetera, and we want to recognize that, but the food card issue was—it bungled. We have to admit that, it bungled.

11.15 a.m.

Mr. Chairman: Let us go to the Association of Principals of Public Secondary Schools and what your experience has been with the food intervention initiative. I do not know if Mr. Mootoo or Mrs. Carrington-James would like to take it on.

Mrs. Carrington-James: Okay, maybe I can. The experience at the secondary school level is really similar to what that of the primary schools, Mr. Mottley would have described previously. The experience is not singular and it is echoed and reverberates across the platform of what would have just been said. At the secondary school level, however, we were simply asked to supply a list of children who, indeed, engaged in the programme and that is what we so did and, beyond that, we really did not have any further interaction in the process.

Some principals did report that Members of Parliament would have contacted

them directly, solicited further clarification on the lists, but they were in the minority. Essentially, our experience was similar to the others. What this provided for us though, was an opportunity for what we see as a new normal, a new model of how our new Caribbean school should look, of inter-sectoral and inter-corporate interaction. So we too jumped in there. We had lots of stakeholders on board and, therefore, we reached out to those who had the need where we could have identified the need and we attempted to fill it in a humane and humanistic kind of response.

Brig. Gen. Antoine: Yeah. First of all, let me thank the principals for their cooperation during this exercise. I am fortunate in that I am a sitting MP and I only have eight schools inclusive of one secondary school in my constituency, so it was easy for me to interact with the principals in terms of the School Feeding Programme. Initially, we only got 100 food cards, so I was able to interact with the principals and say, look, we can only give X amount to the various schools as the case may be. So, there was a lot of—I agree, there was a lot of confusion in terms of how we were to administer these food cards, and I want to really thank the principals and the boards for their cooperation in getting—at least, we focused on the most needy and the principals really did send to us who were the most needy in their schools so that we were able to get food cards.

Mr. Chairman: Member Hosein, what was your experience like as an MP in terms of the food cards? Member Antoine indicated he got 100 food cards for eight schools?

Brig. Gen. Antoine: Yes.

Mr. Chairman: That is a stemline to me.

Brig. Gen. Antoine: And some MPs have 27 schools and they got the same amount of food cards.

Mr. Chairman: Member Hosein, what was your experience?

Mrs. Newallo-Hosein: Initially, MPs would have gotten 50 and then 47 and then

we would have gotten a balance of the total to 500. But, in my case, I have 21 primary schools, three secondary schools. That does not take into consideration that a number of students would go to schools that are outside of my constituency. For instance, you might go to Bishops or you may go to Guaico Secondary or North Eastern. So it meant, therefore, that even though—and you had students in excess of 2,000 and that is after you have removed families, because you had to go through the list and ensure that families did not get two and three cards because of children going to various schools. So we did a very thorough removal of—

Mr. Chairman: On an intervention of one card per family?

Mrs. Newallo-Hosein: Yes.

Mr. Chairman: That was the intention.

Mrs. Newallo-Hosein: And even after we gave out the 500, we still had over 2,000 children still to collect food cards. And even when we got hampers we could not do anything. It was insufficient. So when I heard the CEO from the Catholic Board indicate that they were able to get assistance and so forth, the food card, you get for three months and there is a top up, but to a household, when a hamper comes, is it that same family that you are giving that hamper to? Is it that same family getting it or is it another family, in fact, gets it? And so, therefore, we have to look at it and see that a lot of children have not benefited, and there is inequity in the whole system. Because here it is, not only the children who received box lunches are in need. There are also families who do not access the box lunches who are in need as well and, therefore, because the box lunches are limited—you do not get 2,000 boxes. A school does not get 500 boxes of lunch or 100, you know. They get for each class and, therefore, a number of persons would have fallen through the cracks as a result of it.

And when I look at all the submissions that the various boards and the psychological boards sent, you know, hunger—food support is a critical aspect of

ensuring that, you know, when a person is satisfied in terms of having their hunger met, their needs met physically, you know, you are able to produce more, you are able to study. This has not been the case and, therefore, I think, you know, the education system has fallen, not just because of the online lack of devices and various aspects, but also because of the fact that people could not have fed themselves. This is very serious.

Mr. Chairman: So we certainly have a clearer indication—

Mr. Forde: Chairman, when you get a chance, could you bring me in please?

Mr. Chairman: Absolutely, Mr. Forde. Could you turn on your camera please? Is that possible?

Mr. Forde: You want to see me?

Mr. Chairman: Absolutely.

Mr. Forde: Okay. Am I good enough there?

Mr. Chairman: Yes, just centre yourself and your frame first, and go ahead please, Deputy Chair and MP.

Mr. Forde: Yes, yes. Good morning, and I wear two hats. I am Deputy Speaker and I am also the Member for Tunapuna. Again, morning, sorry to be late to your meeting, Mr. Chairman. All right. I think we need to be clear here, right, with regard to the discussion that we are having. All right? We were told that the food cards were for the registered children of the School Feeding Programme. Right? I think there is a clear difference between who are registered and who may eat the box lunch when extra lunches are provided. It is two things. There are registered children for the programme and then there are children that eat box lunch who may not be registered.

Mr. Chairman: Just to intervene, what we established earlier on is how many of the students who even are registered received the lunches, and even the students who were registered for the lunches at various schools at the primary and secondary levels

would have not been able to given the numbers—

Mr. Forde: And I think the Minister of Social Development made that clear, in that 500 food cards would be provided for children who are registered in the School Feeding Programme and the principals were to assist in identifying the most neediest of cases. I understand the principals that somewhere the communication may have been skewed along the lines, because it was also mentioned that the MPs are to give individuals—that the children who would receive would be the children who attend school in your area versus whether they would have resided in your area. And I think the member from the Catholic Board made that clear. Who are we to give? The residents within my constituency or the children who attended schools in my constituency? And I think that also started off with slight hiccup in it.

As an MP, I notified the Minister of Social Development and I proceeded along the lines of issuing these cards to children who were resident in my area, hence the reason—for instance, if I have two children attending schools in two different constituencies, I could then go to the two MPs in the two different constituencies and receive two food cards for one household. But if you are doing it based on residents, my two children will go to the MP where I live and I will receive one food card for that particular child. Chairman, it actually happened.

Mr. Chairman: Member Forde, could I intervene? I take what you are saying. What I am saying, from you just explaining that to me is extremely confusing, and one can imagine in an emergency situation where—and I know the Government is trying its best because it is an exigent circumstance. This is a pandemic. These are emergency measures that any Government would have had to put in place, but your explanation there is also very confusing, and I know you may understand it because you are internal to the situation but those who are external to the Government's situation may be thoroughly confused by that, and I think that is what all the stakeholders here have been explaining to us.

So even though—whether or not X was the intention, Y was the intention, the communication was somewhere along the line flawed or mistaken and in addition to which, added to that, what would have exacerbated the situation would have been obviously very limited resources and a huge need across the board in Trinidad and Tobago. So, at least, we have established that and, hopefully, we can learn from that.

Let us move to—because we have very limited time here—the issue of—because I do not want to run out of time and not be able to deal with some of the other pressing issues in terms of the devices and what would have occurred and I do not want to lament what went. I want to know what situation occurs now and what is needed for us moving forward because we still have June to get through. There is the July/August normal vacation period where I am sure some stakeholders would be looking to make up if they can, and trying to move to a September reopening in a safe manner for the nation's schools.

So, if I could start with the principals again and then we go through the various stakeholders in terms of what occurs now with devices. Has that situation improved? Has the Internet connectivity situation improved? Because students still, at the end of the day, no matter what miscommunications we as the stakeholders make, we have to ensure that the education is provided for the students because they are the ones who should be our primary focus at this time.

So, I would like to start with the representative of the National Primary Schools Principals' Association, in terms of the infrastructure and also if you could deal with in terms of infrastructure, if the devices situation has improved and the connectivity situation is improving and what you would like to see happening in terms of solid recommendations. So, let us start with the National Primary Schools Principals' Association first on that.

Mr. Mottley: Yes, thank you very much, once again. So, let us talk about the

devices for students, devices for teachers and then we can talk about recommendations going forward. As of today, I saw some emails going around informing principals to inform their teachers to collect laptops. So the Ministry would have asked for teachers to identify—asked us to identify teachers who may need devices to reach our students. So that had happened. That was a couple weeks ago, perhaps, maybe about a month ago, but I understand now that these laptops are being distributed. By the way, I am not too sure how many these laptops are, but I am told it is not very many, because these laptops—

Mr. Chairman: My understanding is that there are 12,000 laptops that would have been acquired by the Ministry in the first instance and they are seeking to acquire more.

Mr. Mottley: Right. So that is one. So let us talk about the devices for the students. The Ministry of Education would have also gone on a fact-finding missions about two months ago or about a month ago asking us to assist in identifying students who did not have access to a device or did not have access to Internet or both. We would have provided that information to the Ministry. We have not yet seen any move towards filling those gaps. So, I cannot say where we are where that is concerned. Perhaps, the Ministry of Education would be better able to advise us.

Now, going forward, because we would have recognized that quite a number of our students would not have been able to access Internet devices and also the Internet and because we know that if Government/Ministry of Education were to engage in such, it would have been a huge cost. So we sought—“we” meaning the National Primary School Principals’ Association, we sought to do some brainstorming to find out how we can engage many of our students. Because, again, somebody talked about equity, and we needed to ensure that the majority of our students, not now, not what is happening now, because not many of our students are being engaged online despite the various platforms besides WhatsApp, et cetera.

So we came up with a proposal and we put it forward to the Ministry of Education. This proposal involved the use of television. We have heard the Catholic Board talk about television, but we went a little bit further. We did not ask—in our proposal, we are not considering TTT, because TTT you have to share TTT with so many other kinds of programming. So, we talked about using Channel 4 or using Channels 9 and 14. I know these channels are no longer on the air, but the Government would have the equipment—these equipment would still be available to the Government. So we thought that, perhaps, maybe the Government could assign to the Ministry of Education either Channel 4 or Channels 9 and 14.

We know that television is “much” widely reached than Internet in Trinidad and Tobago. It is cheaper. Free to air transmission is cheaper. The Government would not have to go and buy a television for every house because many houses do have televisions in them. What may have had to happen is that they may have to tweak the towers to ensure that reception is better, et cetera, et cetera. So we put forward a huge and a very nice proposal to the Ministry. We said that not just the SEA students would be accommodated, but actually Infants to Standard 5 would be accommodated. We put forward a timetable how we can engage our students in a whole day class or engage all of the students from about 9.00 in the morning to about 3.00 in the afternoon period, Monday to Friday, in various subject areas. We submitted a proposal about a month and a half ago. We have not seen anything where that is concerned.

Now, going forward, we know that once school restarts, once school resumes, that we must continue. We have to continue using a blended approach to education; be it online, be it television, et cetera. So we also said that going forward that the television can continue to play a significant role in continuing education among our students.

Mr. Chairman: So, you are suggesting a multi-media approach. The representative

of the Association of Principals of Public Secondary Schools. What is your suggestion where that is concerned in terms of the devices and infrastructure available now in this paradigm moving forward?

Mr. Mootoo: Yes, Mr. Chairman. Just to say, no significant increase in the devices or even the Internet availability to students or teachers have taken place at the secondary school levels. I know that the Catholic Board, the Presbyterian Board, and one or two other groups have made attempts to ensure that their students' needs are met. Successfully so, I must say, the vast majority of students in the government schools and the teachers in the government schools, their situations have not improved markedly. In fact, it probably has decreased because most households, as people are saying, would have like one laptop at home, one device, generally, and you may have more than one child in your home as is my case indeed. And, as a result, when we have online classes, the children sometimes have to choose who will have the device in order to access the classes. And some of our experiences also have been that our students and teachers are on fixed, you know, limited hours of Internet access—that is the plan they pay for—so they are not always favoured to access the online tuition.

Mr. Chairman: So, generally, the device situation and connectivity have not improved.

Mr. Mootoo: Have not improved at all.

Mr. Chairman: Let us move quickly to the Presbyterian situation. Have you seen an improvement in because we want to get to the other topics before we end?

Mr. Ramlal: Mr. Chairman, we had a meeting with Minister Francis and Minister Garcia on the 24th of April and various Ministry officials. They met with all the denominational boards. [*Interruption*]

Mr. Chairman: Mr. Mootoo, could you mute your mike please? Go ahead please, Mr. Ramlal.

Mr. Ramlal: Yes. So we had a meeting on the 24th of April with both Ministers and the Ministry officials and the issues that Mr. Mottley and Mr. Mootoo raised came up—the issue of Internet connectivity, the devices for students and teachers—and a lot of promises were made to improve Internet connectivity. As far as we are aware, nothing has been done in that area. The situation remains the same. As Mr. Mottley said, I am aware that from this morning teachers have been called to collect laptops. How effective that is going to be, seeing that schools are due to be closed on the 3rd of July officially. It might be a problem in terms of effectiveness.

Going forward, it seems to me that we have to think out of the box and as Mr. Mottley said, the common denominator in our households might be the television set. So the use of the television set to reach our students might be an appropriate measure, because getting devices to all our students who are in need would be extremely costly and difficult, and even if we could get the devices to them, the Internet connectivity might not be there.

Also, we believe that even when school reopens in September, provision has to be made for online teaching/learning going forward, and it might be a costly exercise but, as Mr. Mootoo said, a teacher might have a laptop at their home, but it has to be shared among other occupants of the house. So consideration should be given to providing teachers with at least one laptop so that they can execute their duties whenever they have to do online; learning, teaching.

Mr. Chairman: I am going to put a pause here. I am going back to Member Hosein, because I know there is the issue of infrastructure in terms of going back out in September, and also for situations regarding CAPE and CSEC coming up, and later on SEA. So member Hosein, in terms of that infrastructure, I know you had a couple questions.

Mrs. Newallo-Hosein: Sorry. Thank you, Chair. One of the things I wanted to bring together and to bring in other questions, it is that we need the devices and so

forth for both teachers and students which raises the question of the online teaching on a voluntary basis.

Mr. Chairman: I am going to come to that later on, member Hosein, in a different segment.

Mrs. Newallo-Hosein: Okay.

Mr. Chairman: But I really want you to focus on the CSEC and CAPE preparedness and also SEA later on.

Mrs. Newallo-Hosein: Not only that too, but also you have the Caribbean Vocational Qualification. How that is being dealt with? How are the SBAs being dealt with? The timing of these exams, is it in accordance with what the schools are asking for? Is there any sort of an agreement with the Ministry of Education in going forward? Are the students prepared?

Mr. Chairman: Let us start with the Catholic Board on that, please.

Ms. Mangroo: So we are looking at the CSEC and CAPE exams. There has not been any consultation between the Ministry of Education and the Catholic Board on this matter. However, our views are mixed. Our principals—remember the Catholic Board represents only five public secondary schools and one private secondary. There are other Catholic Boards that own the other Catholic secondary schools. Our principals are telling us that, generally, their school-based assessments were almost completed when school closed. The IAs for CAPE, in some cases, there are issues, but there are specific subject areas where there are bigger issues and in the subject areas students were required to come together in order to complete them.

Mrs. Newallo is asking about the CVQ which is something that I am deeply interested in, having worked on it previously when I was in the Ministry, and the CVQ requires students to perform and they have got to perform while they are being observed.

Mr. Chairman: It is practical assessment?

Ms. Mangroo: Yes. They are. So there are those issues. We have been asking the Ministry, we, not only the Catholic Board, but the Association of Denominational Boards, have been asking the Ministry to bring together all of the stakeholders in one place so that we can discuss all of these issues and the various perspectives can be aired, and I think we can come up with solutions a lot faster than what currently is done and that is meeting individual stakeholders at a time. I think we can solve problems. All of the persons who are here this morning have indicated willingness to work towards solving problems. I think bringing us together will help that a lot.

Mr. Chairman: In terms of the schools' preparedness, particularly I am dealing specifically with CAPE and CSEC here and I guess the CVQs, I saw the Ministry of Education or the Minister of Education doing some visits to particular schools. I know he went to QRC and a couple other schools. What are your impressions of the guidelines given and material for preparedness in terms of PPEs, personal protection devices, possible thermal units, the transportation of students in a safe manner to schools, et cetera. Have there been discussions where those are concerned? Since I have you from the Catholic Board, can you respond to that and then I will go to the other stakeholders, please.

Ms. Mangroo: So, Mr. Chairman, I cannot say I have any impressions because I have seen no guidelines. We are awaiting these guidelines very anxiously. Our principals, of course, being professionals, have a sense of what has to be done and they have started making some preparation. But I think there is a lot that we need to discuss and a lot we need to agree to in terms of the safety of the students, and remember the safety of the teachers as well and the safety of other staff.

Mr. Chairman: So you have no guidelines yet?

Ms. Mangroo: Not yet.

Mr. Chairman: And no equipment, et cetera?

Ms. Mangroo: Not yet.

Mr. Chairman: Let us go to ASJA board on that. Ms. Ogeer, can you give us a sense of what your experience has been in case of preparedness, PPEs for CAPE, CSEC and CVQs if you have those under your remit; or Mr. Hosein? Ms. Ogeer, please put on your microphone. Your microphone is off. Please unmute it. You have to unmute it on the device, please. Ms. Ogeer—okay, thank you. Go ahead now please.

Ms. Ogeer: With regard to the guidelines, we have not received clear guidelines from the Ministry of Education, but our principals are using their initiative in trying to put things in place in preparation for our students to come out to school for these exams.

Mr. Chairman: Let us go to Mr. Bajnath from the Presbyterian Secondary Schools' Board. Mr. Bajnath, go ahead please. Have you received any guidelines or actual equipment?

Mr. Bajnath: No, we have not received any guidelines. However, similarly, principals have been taking the initiative. What we would like to see is—each government school has an HSE officer assigned to them and the standardization of the procedures and things like that should be shared so that all schools will follow the same best practice to ensure safety of the students, because we have not received any guidelines. The secondary schools principals did not receive any, but they are using their initiative to do as much as they could, but we should all share our learnings so that we will all have the best practice for the benefit and the safety of students and staff at the school.

Mr. Chairman: It is quite interesting to hear and it is commendable that principals are using their initiatives and the individual guidelines, but my guidelines and operations may be different to yours, and I would imagine there is a standardized approach because of the gravity of the situation that is at hand. I guess it is a fact-finding mission that we are on here. Member Antoine, you are next. Member

Antoine? Thank you, go ahead please.

Brig. Gen. Antoine: Yeah. I was holding back. My question is to deal more or less with the CEAs.

Mr. Chairman: Okay, no problem. All right. So then I can gather that there has not been any. Has anyone received the guidelines—I better ask a broad question—as to safety protocols moving forward? If anyone received guidelines, show by a show of hands? I guess not. So I guess—you received guidelines, Mr. Mootoo.

Mr. Mootoo: Yes, Sir. Let me say that the CMO has worked with the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Education has given some limited guidelines to principals by way of a memo. The Chief Education Officer actually also issued a memo last week indicating some very brief guidelines, but we did get guidelines.

Mr. Chairman: Could you share, if you could remember, what those guidelines would look like? Is it the normal PPE, social distancing, washing hands hygiene?

Mr. Mootoo: That is right. It is broad guidelines like those. The school principals, however, have been asked to submit now a list of their requirements to enact those guidelines.

11.45 a.m.

Mr. Chairman: So those guidelines, those brief guidelines that you have received, do they include how you are to operationalize social distancing in a classroom setting, vis-à-vis desks, chairs, students coming into classes, leaving classrooms, gathering in areas that they would normally gather under normal conditions that may be now harmful to their health, et cetera, inclusive of teachers? Have you received any guidelines along those lines?

Mr. Mootoo: Probably not full coverage of what you are asking but we are told, for instance, to place desks, students six feet apart. We are told, for instance, in our various discussions to make for passageway, corridors one-way; to ensure that the water troughs, for instance, the students are not too closely lined up, and so on. So

we have those kinds of guidelines. The Ministry has indicated they will send signage to the schools. They have indicated also that—we are told—the principals are the chief operation officers in the schools, so they have asked us for things like how many additional sinks we will need, hand sanitizing equipment, et cetera, et cetera. And as the PS would have indicated in the first of these sessions, there is now an online platform where we put that information so they have immediate access to that information.

I know that the Ministry has already started dispersing some cleaning supplies to various schools; they have started, I think, if not yesterday, day before, and they are doing it on a district level. So my district, Victoria, is scheduled to receive those initial supplies, cleaning supplies on the 12th of June. So the Ministry is working. Are they working fast enough is another question, because we in the schools are expecting and have scheduled some students to return from next week to complete the SBAs, and so on. Some schools, I must say, have completed SBAs, but others, especially the Form 6, the CAPE students are required to return from next week even though it may be on a small-scale basis.

Mr. Chairman: Now, I know they are not particularly—or might know about it now—but, Ms. Ghany, you wanted a comment. Unmute your microphone, please. Thank you. Your microphone is muted again.

Ms. Ghany: Thank you, Senator. Yes, I just wanted to join the conversation because I think that, you know, we need in this conversation to also consider the children with disabilities in a special category. When I say that, communication with regard to all these matters, opening protocols, how are we going to communicate to them; there may be various methods in which we need to communicate, because we are not just talking about children here with Down syndrome who have intellectual disabilities, but we have children who may be sight impaired, hearing impaired, wheelchair bound, and they would also need to have specific consideration for them

where they are actually included in a school. Because as I started my last comment, you know, COVID has highlighted the inequalities of our existing school system and where many are still not even included in a school, you know, we cannot even get to the point of talking about CAPE and SEA, and all these various examinations because we just do not even include them.

So, you know, in the discussion we really need to, for those who are fortunate enough to attend a school, we really need to have some sort of programme that targets these children in particular and how we are going to be dealing with communicating with them and their parents.

Mr. Chairman: I am glad you mentioned that because it entered my mind that I would ask you the question first and then go to Dr. Mahase, has there been any guideline or communication formatted for children with special needs in terms of basic interactions during COVID-19? Because children with special needs in the 13 categories will not be able to access the usual radio, television, print in many instances to understand how they should keep themselves safe or how their families can keep them safe. And I will start with Ms. Ghany on that and go with Dr. Mahase next.

Ms. Ghany: I am not aware of any programmes locally that have dealt with that specifically. We have been using international programmes, things that have been shared by the National Down Syndrome Society and the National Down Syndrome Congress and Inclusion International. I have been accessing that information and sharing it with our families on platforms that I use. The other area too that I just wanted to mention with regard to the protocols for opening, is that children with Down syndrome may have comorbidities as well. Now, many do not but some do, and these also have to be taken into consideration when looking at the opening protocols as well and what exposure the children will have. So again this means that we need to have a lot more individual assessments being done because it is not a

“one size fits all” when it comes to children with disabilities.

Mr. Chairman: Dr. Mahase.

Dr. Mahase: So it is the same thing with dealing with the children with autism. What we have noticed, generally speaking across the board, is that individual NGOs have been putting out information, you know, individual NGOs have been communicating with their children with their membership, but nothing has come from any Government Ministry addressing children with special needs specifically, and I think what we need to have or what could be suggested is that the Ministry of Education start exploring different ways of communicating with the public, taking into consideration those with special needs. You know, whether it is in the form of more visual, visual sense of washing your hands, or whatever it is, the message that we want to get out there, but just putting out these fliers all the time is not reaching everyone. We have an entire population that is just being totally excluded and we need to start having other alternatives to reach out to them.

Now, it can be done also through the NGOs, but it should not be the job of the NGOs alone. The NGOs need to work in collaboration with the Ministry of Education as well as the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services to reach their population. So there needs to be more interaction and more communication within those Ministries, with those Ministries and the NGOs, and with those Ministries and the wider public, taking into consideration those with special needs.

Mr. Chairman: With that said, and I will start with you and then go to Ms. Ghany before I go to Member Hosein on the voluntary nature of the teacher interaction situation which from our data that we got last week was very limited. But with that said, we have before us the Director of Student Support Services, Prof. Conrad, I do believe his name was, and he said they were overwhelmed before this pandemic, and I could just imagine how much more overwhelmed they are because they have been

fielding some 1,200 calls for this, students with behavioural issues, et cetera, but with limited resources. Has there been any interaction between your NGO, Ms. Ghany's NGO to help to use the assets and the expertise of the NGOs in terms of providing that extra layer of support for students and learners with special needs through this situation at all? Has there been any direct contact with the Student Support Services and your organization? Dr. Mahase and Ms. Ghany.

Dr. Mahase: So prior to this situation, prior to COVID situation we have been liaising with Dr. Conrad directly on a variety of different things, including teachers aides, but since the whole situation with the schools we have not had any contact with the Student Support Services or with Dr. Conrad as yet.

Mr. Chairman: None at all?

Dr. Mahase: None at all.

Mr. Chairman: Ms. Ghany.

Ms. Ghany: Exactly as Dr. Mahase said, we have been for the last eight years, since the inception of the network, we have had a very good working relationship with the Ministry of Education and the student support department, promising discussions. In fact, if you can recall, you know, the inclusive school system was supposed to be launched this year with a pilot project, we have had absolutely no—we had one meeting, prior to COVID in March, with Dr. Conrad where we were told it would happen in April; it was supposed to happen in January, of course COVID came and since then we have had absolutely no conversation or communication with Dr. Conrad. We have actually sent him some of these international best practices that we have been researching and sharing with our members for them to look at and consider.

WHO also has guidelines hoping that, you know, maybe in the implementation going forward they would use some of these instead of trying to recreate, you know, the wheel, use some of these documents as guidelines to come

up with our opening protocols, but unfortunately we have not heard anything from them.

Mr. Chairman: Like I said, but it is just one of those exigent circumstances. I hope that changes. Member Hosein, and the next topic would be, of course, one you wanted to raise earlier, and we go to member Antoine after, in terms of the challenges being faced by the stakeholders before us today with the voluntary nature of the teacher interaction.

Mrs. Newallo-Hosein: Absolutely. But before I go there, Chair, if you would permit me just to ask, what is the number of Form 5 and Form 6 students who are yet to submit SBAs within the network of schools? And also, there was a statement made by the Permanent Secretary, acting, that the assessment for students seeking enrolment at UWI will be based on the students' CAPE Unit 1 marks in Lower 6 rather than the CAPE Unit 2 results for 2020, and I was wondering if the group that is before us believes that this method of assessment, is it unfair to the children, and especially when we are dealing with children who have special needs. I mean, how are they impacted by such a decision? And then I would go to my substantive question which is: The submission that came from the boards, indicating that TTUTA was advised that teachers would be conducting the online teaching on a voluntary basis, as such given that distance learning may become a more significant approach to teaching in the future, would you support a renegotiation in terms and conditions of teachers to establish distance learning as one of the standard methods of teaching?

Mr. Chairman: So I guess we can go to the public secondary schools and the Presbyterian and the other board schools in terms of the assessment protocol that has been suggested for matriculation to university by using, is it Lower 6 Unit 1 SBAs as part of the assessment protocol? Is that it, member Hosein?

Mrs. Newallo-Hosein: Yes.

Mr. Chairman: Yes. So we can go to, I guess, Mrs. Carrington-James; Mrs. Carrington-James first of the Principals of Public Secondary Schools, and then we can go to the other secondary school representatives.

Mrs. Carrington-James: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Utilization of the Lower 6 grade as a basis for matriculation into tertiary level does not immediately to us pose a challenge. The modules, the initial intent of CAPE was that they were individual modules that could stand alone. By the time a child has done Unit 1, he or she is already on a trajectory that will pretty much predict their success at tertiary level. The students who then proceed to 6th Form anywhere, those who are focused, directed, and we do not see an immediate challenge with that in a nutshell.

What we do know is the ability for us, locally, to do the other thing that nobody speaks about, the award of scholarships, and so on, we feel drives that, but we feel there is a balance there because those children this year in 2020 who will speak to scholarships would have already had a full paper if they are Lower 6. So for us, matriculation to tertiary and the balance of award, locally, for us, you have that controlling performance in the Lower 6 for the current Upper 6, and this modified exam in the Upper 6, and matriculation to university is not a problem because we feel that you can indeed project on a curve, the trajectory of those students.

Mr. Chairman: And I think Prof. Copeland of UWI, the principal of UWI also said there is collaboration between UWI and the three campuses in the Caribbean, and the secondary schools on that new matriculation matrix that must be enacted because of the COVID pandemic. Mr. Bajnath as the representative of the secondary Presbyterian schools, what is your perspective on this?

Mr. Bajnath: Yes, we support the idea, however, some of the problems we encounter are that some of the students develop later on, maybe in the Upper 6 and they tend to repeat all of their units, or one or two of their units to assure a greater

academic achievement. Whether that would be considered for university requirement may pose a concern, especially if they did not do well at the lower level. However, I guess, bearing all in mind, it should still work out good for the student, and hopefully these things are some of the things they should take into consideration.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. And from the ASJA Board of Education, what is your perspective on this?

Mr. Hosein: RahimoolHosein here. Mr. Chair, permit me before we go into that aspect, we initially started with the question of the online voluntary teaching required—

Mr. Chairman: No, we are going to that right after.

Mr. Hosein: Okay. Well then, I will pass some time. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Okay. So, member Hosein, it is yours in terms of the online voluntary teaching and the impact that is having going forward. The information we had presented to us by the Education Ministry is that, I think—and I hope I am not misquoting or not remembering, recollecting properly, there was nine or 10 per cent in March, and up to 32 per cent participation by teachers in April, if I am not mistaken. There had not been figures given for May. So, member Hosein, the floor is yours.

Mrs. Newallo-Hosein: So I was asking, you know, whether the—TTUTA has advised teachers to conduct online teaching on a voluntary basis and given that distance learning may become a more significant approach to teaching in the future, would you support a renegotiation of the terms and conditions of teachers to establish distance learning as one of the standard methods of teaching, of course, would also bring in to play accountability? How do you establish accountability practices?

Mr. Chairman: Who wants to go first?

Mr. Hosein: Permit me, Sir.

Mr. Chairman: Absolutely. Go ahead, please.

Mr. Hosein: Rahimool Hosein once again. Distance learning while they embrace the technology today, we see it that there is nothing that could physically replace the teacher in the classroom; nothing up to this point in time, even with the COVID. While we have challenges with the online learning right now, I think—permit me to comment, the head of the Principals Association indicated to reach the masses of students in our population we utilize the TV, and the channel, whatever channel—I would like to humbly suggest that given a scenario when all the teachers, they have the laptops, they are well equipped to do the online teaching; all the students, they have the devices, I want to suggest that we could probably start that right away, almost immediately. Right now we do not have to wait until September. Right now we have our schools are vacant, there are no students attending the school.

To overcome the problem of the voluntary teaching, in the absence of any negotiations with the Ministry of Education and TTUTA, why is it after sanitizing all our schools, primary and secondary, we ask the teachers to report for duty at the school and they conduct their online teaching from the school. That would alleviate the need for a teacher using his or her resources providing the Internet, the data, and whatnot. The teacher would use the school's data.

Mr. Chairman: Well, Mr. Hosein, it may be a very noble suggestion but it also depends on the assessment by the public health officials, the CMO in terms of the safety requirements as the Government has indicated they are phased, six phases for reopening and people going back out in different circumstances. So that will have to be done, certainly in consultation with the public health officials, because even teachers going back in to a particular location has to be done under the guidance of public health officials on the data that they present in terms of maintaining the safety for those teachers.

Mr. Hosein: That is correct but I said, I prefaced by saying that once the school is

sanitized. Remember if most of our schools, in our primary schools, in the secondary schools we have at least 50 members per staff; in the secondary schools, in our ASJA school we have no more than about 25 per school, and we have a huge building in some instances, in most of the cases, where the teachers could be well socially distanced and conduct their online teaching, and in this way each teacher would reach his or her students in his or her particular class, rather than if they use—if they were to come in, it is not a case of “one shoe fits all”.

Mr. Chairman: Absolutely, but as many have said before, it has to be a hybrid approach moving forward. And I think there also needs to be consideration given that, given the World Health Organization and other global public health officials stating that the pandemic situation would become more normal than we would prefer, so the education system to me, given what we have gone through this time around, as an emergency response must put consideration or must consider a faster response and a more holistic response and a more easily applicable hybrid response moving forward, so that we respond should this happen again in the future, in a more effective manner. Anyone just wants to chime in on that, and just to, in terms of information, the Education Ministry provided approximately 4,000 teachers are providing online services via the Ministry’s Learning Management System (LMS), but they could not verify the number of teachers that are utilizing alternative means and online platforms, including WhatsApp, Zoom, Goggle Meet, et cetera. So in terms of the suggestion moving forward, we can go across the floor where that is concerned and then we could go to member Antoine who I know had a question on this topic is standing by.

Mr. Ramlal: Mr.Chairman—

Ms. Mangroo: Mr.Chairman, may I speak—

Mr. Chairman: Yes, go ahead, please.

Mr. Ramlal: Yes. Concerning the question Mrs. Hosein asked about the policy and

what we will do going forward, now, the voluntary policy is enshrined in what TTUTA put out as a “home-to-work” policy. As we go forward the Ministry of Education has to come up very clearly with their policy for online learning teaching. In the written submission that we were asked to submit it was stated that the Ministry of Education indicated there was a policy for online learning teaching, but you would see from the Presbyterian Board response, we are not aware of such policy; we were not involved in any such discussion.

Online teaching learning would mean having to renegotiate terms and conditions of service between the recognized union and Chief Personnel Officer, because working from home will have a number of different issues to look at, the home environment in terms of the structure, in terms of the persons who are present in the home. So if we have to go forward with online learning teaching as a part of our education system, there will have to be negotiations between TTUTA, the recognized union, the various stakeholders as to what are the clear-cut policies, what would be the legal obligations and what would be the legal implications of such a policy.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. Will the Catholic board like the chime in on that from their perspective?

Ms. Mangroo: Yeah. Mr. Chairman, I think this is a loaded issue; I am hearing people using online learning and teaching as synonymous with distance education. Distance education embodies far more than that, and in fact the Ministry of Education had at one time a national open school. There is a National Open School of Trinidad and Tobago. There were 32 open schools actually. The teaching by distance does not necessarily mean teaching from home and it does not necessarily mean using the computer. There are other forms, other means of teaching. In fact, many of our teachers have already been engaged in such forms of education before the COVID situation. There were many teachers that I know of who engaged

students who were not in the classroom for one reason or another; they were ill. We have had students on maternity leave at home. We have had students who had to leave the country with their parents for one reason or another, and teachers have found ways to engage them.

The issue here is with schools physically closed what are teachers required to do, and I think this takes a lot of discussion, and again I would recommend that all the stakeholders be involved. Teaching from home is part of the issue, but it is only one small part of the issue. The location is—I mean, even if we look at bringing teachers in school and everybody has to be using the Internet at the same time, you know, there are other issues; there are physical issues and things. It is something we need to explore, not only because of COVID, as we move forward in September—we have been told schools will open, but in no jurisdiction that I know of has school opened with all the students and all the teachers in the school; they open in one level.

Mr. Chairman: At the same time.

Ms. Mangroo: At the same time. They open in one level.

Mr. Chairman: Member Antoine.

Brig. Gen. Antoine: Good day. I am going forward, there is a cost to COVID, we speak about funding for the supply and the sanitization of the schools, the use of thermal units in testing the students as they come into school, will we be totally dependent on Government to provide this funding or are the various boards and the various schools providing part of the funding to deal with the issue of how we approach COVID-19 when schools reopen, in particular with the students who would have to sit SEA and CAPE?

Mr. Chairman: I think it is a great question and let us not leave out the private sector in that. I think we can start with the Principals Public Secondary Schools on that, what are your perspectives and then move to the primary school situation, and we would move to the other boards on that.

Mr. Mootoo: As you know, Mr. Chairman—

Mrs. Carrington-James: Go ahead, Mr. President. Well, let me start and you would—let me go.

Mr. Chairman: Because member Antoine is absolutely right, I mean, the burden, the financial burden of COVID-19 in any jurisdiction, unless you are a very wealthy jurisdiction, it conceivably has to be borne across the board by the State primarily, I am sure, but certainly by other aspects of the society dimensions to provide the kind of interventions in these emergency circumstances and moving forward. Mrs. James, go ahead, please.

Mrs. Carrington-James: All right, I will start. I think our Ministry firmly recognizes that, and I would start in the general terms because we feel as an organization, as an association that our representation to the Ministry of Education was warmly received in the context particularly out of a conference that we have in 2021 that seeks to talk transformation and innovation in education. Trinidad and Tobago would host the Caribbean regional conference come 2021, and our Ministry recognizes that they cannot do it alone. The theme of that conference is Innovation in Education so COVID permitted, that is the direction, and we have the full support of the current Ministry office.

Mr. Chairman: Is that going to be a virtual conference?

Mrs. Carrington-James: COVID permitted, Sir, Mr. Chairman, we will have a historic regional conference. For us innovation is a mindset, we have to begin to move in that direction that recognizes this is inter-sectorial. It cannot be the Government alone, no state can do it all alone hence we are here. Mr. Mootoo, I will hand—Mr. Chairman—

Mr. Chairman: Let me go to Ms. Kalkman first because she has been there for a while and has not contributed, and then Mr. Nero on that, please.

Mrs. Carrington-James: Okay.

Ms. Kalkman: Mr. Chairman, NPSPA has some concerns moving forward, re: the reopening of schools and funding to ensure that our schools are in a place of readiness to receive our students, and one of the concerns we have is that funding has not been received by government schools, and the boards received some part funding in February. So that we are looking at social distancing and physical distancing in our schools and NPSPA has multiple concerns and challenges looking at that. We are asking, is social distancing and physical distancing really a reality that can take place in the primary school system? Because funding would be needed to supply sanitation, materials to maintain an environment that is required by the Ministry of Health on a continuous basis, where does this fund come from? And I heard someone raised earlier that are we going to rely on the Government solely, but that is why we need to have consultation. And I agree with Ms. Mangroo, the Ministry of Education needs to have all stakeholders in a consultative meeting where we can raise issues and see if we can come up with solutions going forward, because as the Principals' Association, particularly we are focusing at the primary schools, we have to look at not just social and physical distancing in the school itself, but the children on the way to school.

Transportation to school, most of our students walk to school and take public transport, but there is a new norm that is happening in primary school where we have children being picked up by a driver, and these drivers drive from home to home and pick up children, stuffed in a car like sardines in a tin, so there is no social nor physical distancing. So whatever they pick up they bring it to the school, so that we need to have discussions as to the way forward. Again, sometime in the past the Principals' Association would have raised drop-off and pick-up times that the Ministry of Education will have to make some pronouncements on, because the majority of students would arrive during a certain time frame. But there are students whose parents drop them off as early as 6.00 a.m. in the morning, who is going to

provide that supervision? And then there are the parents who believe that the school is the day-care centre and they do their grocery shopping and mall shopping and then they come, six o'clock, sometimes 6.30, 7.00 to pick up children. Who would be responsible for these children during that time?

So there are a number of factors that we are looking at, and if we are saying we are going to use these thermal testing units to monitor temperatures, and so on, there is a cost attached to it, yes, but who actually is going to implement the usage of these thermal units? Is it going to be the security guard? Is it going to be the teacher, the principal? Remember, teachers already have a job spec that is full and we would be monitoring children. So that these are things we need to look at, washroom, break time, any break that the children go on—

12.15 p.m.

Mr. Chairman: And you are dealing with children who are not always going to be totally cognizant or compliant.

Let me go to Ms. Nero as the Operations Manager at the Catholic Board, in terms of the funding issue and the operationalization, and then we are going to go round robin to each person's final comments, because we are on a broadcast clock here, and we would like to end as far as the text tells us to end. So, Ms. Nero, go ahead please.

Mrs. Nero: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I think it is absolutely necessary that we consider all the stakeholders in any decision that has to come forward with regard to schools. We must recognize that, yes, teachers have been indeed working on a voluntary basis, and teachers have been going way beyond the call. They have been tapping into all of their resources in order to provide as much as they can for students across the board.

We have been speaking about distance learning and so on, but we have not been able to satisfactorily reach all of our students because of connectivity issues

and so on, and we must bear in mind that before we consider a physical opening of schools, a solid plan must be provided by our Ministry of Education engaging the opinions of all the stakeholders before we consider all of those things. So, thank you.

Mr. Chairman: So what I am going to do is go around the room to the heads of the various organizations to deliver your final comments. We thank you, and we apologize for the constraints within which we are operating here, but you would understand we tried to get as many stakeholders together as possible in the two interventions or interfaces that we have had, because we think it is an important issue to display the issues. And obviously from what I am hearing from many of you, you are asking for more consultation and a chance for you to come together and distil these issues and provide recommendations for the benefit of—particularly the greatest stakeholders of all, who are the students.

So I will start with Mr. Mottley and then go to Mr. Mootoo.

Mr. Mottley: Thank you very much, Sir. Let me say that consultation, urgent consultation, is needed at this time. If we are to go with the calendar that was articulated by the Prime Minister, and seems to be supported by the Ministry of Education, that schools will most likely reopen in September, that is not too far away. That is not too far away. So we need to talk. We need to have urgent consultation with all parties involved, just as what we are having today, to discuss the unique context of each situation, and to hear about recommendations and solutions going forward. You would have heard my first VP outline some concerns. Those are very real and major concerns, and we are fearful. We do not know what is going to happen come September if these things are not addressed.

The issue of funding. You have talked about funding, someone talked, I think it was you, you asked the question whether it is fair enough for the Government alone to fund the bill. The truth be told is that many of our primary schools depend

solely on our Government, many, particularly our Government primary schools depend solely on Government, and it needs to be said, we have not received any funding at all for the academic year 2019/2020. The denominational boards however would have received part funding up to February I am told, up to February, but again Government schools, primary schools, did not receive funding from 2019/2020. We are going into a new academic year so to speak come September—well, I mean “kinda”. We need to talk about funding.

So it is urgent Mr. Richards, Chairman Richards, we need to have these discussions and we need to have them urgently.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much. Mr. Mootoo.

Mr. Mootoo: Mr. Chairman, members of this JSC, let me on behalf of the Association of Principals of Public Secondary Schools of Trinidad and Tobago, take this opportunity to thank this JSC for recognizing the voice of the principals. It is an important issue in education and indeed in the history of our country. I just wish to express our honour to be invited to make an input in shaping how education in the 21st Century would evolve postCOVID-19. Of course, the call for meaningful—and I stress meaningful consultation, continues to reverberate, and I thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much. Mrs. Kalapnath Maharaj.

Mrs. Maharaj: Chairman, I do also want to say thanks for inviting the Presbyterian Board to participate here today. What has come forward as very clear is that urgent consultation is needed. We have many commonalities as all our representatives here today and people, members who were here, did say that many commonalities came forward, and that what happened is consultation will also lead to handling those things that are facing us head on, and those things that are looming, those issues that are looming in the background. One thing that we know that will come out will probably be standardization of many of the issues and dealing with many of the

issues that were raised here today.

I would like to ask Mr. Ramlal if there is anything that he would like to add on behalf of the Presbyterian Board.

Mr. Ramlal: Mr. Chairman, I want to join in thanking you as Chairman and members of the Joint Select Committee for inviting us. I simply want to say that as we move towards reopening schools there was one suggestion the Presbyterian Board had made concerning the CSEC and CAPE students, and even when we come to SEA, that prior to the students coming out to write the exams that there should be some sort of psychological counselling for these students, that they should not come out just on the day of the exam to write exams. If provisions could be made for them to come out a week before or two weeks before, where they could be spoken to by professionals to deal with some of the issues of anxiety and stress that they have we will be appreciative of that. We think it would be something that would be to the benefit of our students. I know we did not get an opportunity to discuss SEA, so I will invite the Committee to look at the submission that the Presbyterian Board made, our written submission on SEA. Thank you very much.

Mr. Chairman: I think your suggestion about a psychological assessment of all students, particularly going into these important examinations, is extremely important so that there is an assessment made of how they have coped and what state they are going into in terms of the impact on their possible performance. Also all members are asked to please if you have not been able to provide all your ruminations today, please feel free to supply them to the Committee in writing. We will take them into our final consideration.

Let us go to Mr. Bajnath please.

Mr. Bajnath: I would like to say thanks to the organizers of this session today. It was wonderful. The Presbyterian Secondary School Board would like to thank the Government for all that they have done in trying to assist schools and the education

of our future during this pandemic time. We would like to also express thanks to the teachers, especially in our secondary schools who, without a second thought, came out and did what they had to do to ensure that the children were put at the foremost.

What we would also like to see is a standardization of an HSE procedure in how we return back to school so that we would have all the schools sharing the same methodological way in which we approach this in an HSE manner because if schools open in September and borders open before that, then when schools open we may have to be looking at some different procedural ways in which we start back our system.

Again, we would like to thank you all for the opportunity to be part of this discussion, and maybe via email and other means we can communicate with each other and have more information circulated to you all so it can be better adapted and better grasped to handle this pandemic situation. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. Ms. Mangroo.

Ms. Mangroo: As we move forward there are issues of inclusion and equity that need to be addressed, and they have to be addressed far more than issuing simple statements of intent. I think even before we open in September there is need for widespread consultation. We need to look at the experiences internationally in other jurisdictions. We have got examples right here on our doorstep in the Caribbean and in Latin American that we could draw from.

Our greatest resource is our people, and there are many people, many organizations, that are willing to contribute what resources, far more than the physical resources, to contribute all of the knowledge and the goodwill that we have. We have our teachers who have really, really shown in this time their commitment to education, and the commitment to engaging the children of the nation. So we look forward to continuing consultation and moving forward in education. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you so much. Dr. Mahase.

Dr. Mahase: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. So going forward I would really like to hear more from the Ministry of Education about the implementation of the inclusive education policy. I hope that this policy does not disappear within this whole COVID-19 situation. I also hope that there will be more communication between the Ministry of Education and Support Autism T&T, as well as other NGOs. Many of the NGOs, including us, are working from the ground up. We liaise with parents and caregivers on a regular basis. We have been collecting data, et cetera, and we know that we can assist the Ministry in terms of reaching out to parents and caregivers, and also in terms of coming up with ideas on how we can reach the kids in most need.

I want to thank you for having Support Autism T&T here and for considering children with special needs, because after all every single child, regardless of ability, should really have an equal access to education here in Trinidad and Tobago. Thank you very much.

Mr. Chairman: It is their right; and finally Ms. Ghany.

Ms. Ghany: Thank you, Senator. I would like to first thank you for making sure that the disability agenda was placed in this Joint Select Committee, because in many instances we are left behind or not included.

Mr. Chairman: Not under my watch.

Ms. Mangroo: I know, and I am very happy to see us included in this discussion because I think that again too to be in this group with so many distinguished colleagues and educators that it gives us a voice too to make sure that they are also thinking of including children with disabilities and special needs within their schools. I would like to see us moving more towards that universal design for learning, and also where that includes multiple means of engagement, multiple means of representation, and multiple means of action and expression for our children. So I look forward to positive things in the future, and collaboration,

consultation, which results in action. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you all. I would like to thank the representatives from the National Primary Schools Principals Association, the Association of Principals of Public Secondary Schools, the Presbyterian Primary Schools Board of Education, the Presbyterian Secondary Schools Board of Education, the ASJA Board of Education, the Catholic Education Board, Support Autism T&T and Lisa Ghany from Downe Syndrome Family Network. We had also invited the Psychologists Association of Trinidad and Tobago and the Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha, but they could not be with us today to have a kind of holistic approach.

I will give the assurance that we will try to have more of these, because obviously it is one of the few forums, if any at all, that people could have come together and discuss ideas in a passionate but objective manner, and it shows the need for more of these types of fora in terms of outlining and distilling many of the issues facing education in Trinidad and Tobago, with a view to providing the kind of education we want and moulding the kind of citizens we want in Trinidad and Tobago.

I would also like to thank the other members of the Joint Select Committee of Social Services and Public Administration, member Newallo-Hosein, member Antoine, the Vice-Chair, the Deputy Speaker Esmond Forde and member Ameen who joined us for a short while, and the other members who could not be with us today. Of course, I would like to thank the Secretariat for doing, as usual, yeoman in organizing this.

As I said before, please feel free to submit anything you have wanted to contribute but did not have the time to, to the Secretariat that we would consider in our final deliberations, so we can provide a holistic report in the interest of the children and the learners in Trinidad and Tobago.

On behalf of the entire team, thank you very much, and please be safe out

there. Stakeholders, thank you so much again. We appreciate your being here with us, and please continue to do your great works and be safe. We will be in touch soon enough.

12.21 p.m.: *Meeting adjourned.*

APPENDIX VI: SUMMARY OF THE DATA AND CHALLENGES IN THE SSSD'S DATA COLLECTION REPORT FOR REMOTE LEARNING ACCESS

Tables 1 to 3 highlight the data collected by the SSSD on access to learning and needs of parents of special needs students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 1 Number of Special Needs Homes Receiving Grants

NUMBER OF HOMES RECEIVING:					
District	Disability Grant	Unemployment Grant	Relief	Food Card	Public Assistance
CARONI	19	17		8	N/A
North Eastern	10	17		5	5
Port-of-Spain and Environs	Info not available at the moment	Info not available at the moment		Info not available at the moment	N/A
St. George East	4	0		13	N/A
St. Patrick	23	31		3	N/A
South Eastern	35	0		11	N/A
Victoria	19	17		8	N/A

Table 2 Number of Special Needs Home with ICT Access

NUMBER OF HOMES WITH ICT ACCESS:				
District	Internet/Wifi	Phone/What's App	Tablet/SLMS	Computer/SLMS
CARONI	63	68	13	25
North Eastern	38	60	11	5
Port-of-Spain and Environs	33	24	19	19
St. George East	57	82	14	15
St. Patrick	114	120	55	49
South Eastern	64	66	20	21
Victoria	83	83	38	46

Table 3 Number of Special Needs Home requesting Services

NUMBER OF HOMES REQUESTING SERVICES										
District	Strategies	Workshops	Social Stories	Videos	Implementing Schedules	Video Conferencing	Google Classes	Electricity	Computers	Internet
Caroni	31	14	5	22	19	6	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

NUMBER OF HOMES REQUESTING SERVICES										
North Eastern	48	59	21	22	9	8	6	1	2	2
Port-of-Spain and Environs	43	43	15	3	10	3	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
St. George East	55	44	9	33	32	28	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
St. Patrick	86	76	57	64	53	58	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
South Eastern	54	50	45	46	47	33	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Victoria	66	56	36	58	37	41	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

Challenges of parents during the COVID-19 pandemic

- Homes with only one device which require sharing and do not have access to printing facilities
- Difficulty accessing and navigating the SLMS platform
- The Blind and Visually Impaired and Hearing Impaired ASD students are having great difficulty productively accessing the online platforms
- Many parents have stated that they have attempted to access grants, however, they have been unsuccessful
- Some parents indicated challenges with having a dedicated and functional academic space and limited access to educational supplies and specialized equipment.
- Parents indicated challenges with internet access due to living in remote areas.
- Parents may be unable to own a desktop or laptop given financial hardships
- Broadband overload due to the fact that many persons are now working from home.
- The only source of connectivity for most parents is via a data plan on cell phones which are limited, affected by reception issues and an additional cost to parents.
- Difficulty contacting some parents since the contact information is unreachable.
- Parents are dealing with multiple issues at this time which have created additional strain on families. Providing meals for children who are now at home for an extended time is now the main concern of most parents.
- Parents may have their own intellectual and educational challenges are unable to support their children during and after sessions.
- Many students need maximum support to stay on and complete task and have been dependent on the services and support of Aides in the academic settings.

APPENDIX VII: APPSST&T DRAFT POLICY FOR ONLINE TEACHING AND LEARNING



ONLINE TEACHING-LEARNING POLICY

POLICY FOR ONLINE TEACHING AND LEARNING

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1. General Introduction

APPSST&T aims to continue to assist in the delivery of high quality education for students through classroom learning supported by digital technologies. Our students will use digital technologies and applications as part of their everyday learning. Online learning is not intended to replace the learning experiences that occur inside the classroom. Online and blended learning provide opportunities for learners to work more independently, expand their agency, and learn to use tools and strategies that they otherwise might not have. When students are in attendance at school, digital technologies and applications support in-class learning, homework and study at home:

- When students are absent and classes are taking place, digital technologies and applications provide absent students with resources that are used in class and a means to communicate with their teacher.
- When the school is closed due to exceptional circumstances, digital technologies and applications are able to provide sustained elements of curriculum delivery and a means of communication.

The purpose of this document is to outline how a Blended Learning model, which includes both an Asynchronous Learning Environment as well as Synchronous, real-time engagements. An Asynchronous Learning Environment is a learning environment that does not require participants, teachers, and students to be online at the same time. Synchronous, real-time engagements are opportunities for students to participate in engagements with their teachers and classmates at an established time to allow for interactions in real time.

The following Plan will address:

- Asynchronous learning to ensure the opportunity to learn for all students;
- Synchronous engagements to support learning and socio-emotional well-being of students through real-time engagements;

2. Modes of Instruction

Important Online Learning Applications:

The following Online Platforms support teacher/student/family collaboration to ensure a quality student learning experience when planning and delivering lessons:

- Google classroom, Edmodo, email, and WhatsApp are used by teachers to communicate with whole classes about class work and to make announcements
- Online Learning Platforms are used as the primary digital means for individual students to communicate with teachers and vice versa
- Teachers maintain virtual classrooms through either Zoom, Google Meet or Hangout, Microsoft Teams or MOE Learning Management System (Big Blue Button) as Online Learning Platforms
- Students have access to hardcopy or digital copy editions of the texts they require.

The following guidelines shall apply to online and blended classes:

- 1) Online and blended learning are offered to all classes. Teachers will notify students whether lessons are asynchronous or synchronous and about any software and hardware requirements for participation in online class sessions.
- 2) Teachers will indicate the mode of instruction to the Head of Department.
- 3) Online, blended, and standard subject offerings will be consistent in terms of student learning outcomes, quality, assessment, and in line with Curriculum requirements.

3. Curriculum

Schemes of Work

All teaching staff contribute to the development of “Schemes of Work” and Heads of Departments make these available to all members to ensure that there is consistency across the curriculum and within the department. The schemes of work are created collaboratively within the departments and reflect shared aims and objectives. They also act as a forum for the sharing of good practice.

The following are important features of our schemes of work:

- ✓ Reflect the aims of the school’s learning and teaching policy and ensure that the requirements of syllabi and national objectives are met.
- ✓ They are viewed as a working document that evolves to reflect developing outstanding practice.
- ✓ Reviews take place regularly to ensure that tasks are appropriate and sufficiently challenging.

With that in mind, online and blended teaching are conducted within the following standards:

- Classes are instructor-led.

A clear and consistent teacher presence is central to successful online and blended curriculum delivery. Teachers facilitate student learning by working with students to stay on task and organize their time appropriately to assure success in a virtual environment.

- Online and face to face classes are student-centered.

In online classes, sole reliance on traditional lecture-based learning is impractical. Instead, teachers serve as facilitators and educational coaches, designing challenging activities and providing effective guidance and quality feedback.

- Learning is collaborative in nature.

Classes contain small-group activities and team projects where students must collaborate, in order to foster an online community of learners.

4. Student privacy

Technology tools and apps are making it possible for educators and students to collaborate, create, and share ideas more easily than ever. When schools use technology, students' data—including some personal information—is collected both by teachers and often the companies that provide apps and online services. Teachers use some of this data to inform their instructional practice and get to know their students better. It is just as essential for teachers to protect their students as it is to help them learn.

As teachers utilize technology in the classroom they must also protect their students' privacy by adhering to the following:

- Teachers stick to education technology products which are vetted for privacy
- When using tools like Zoom, teachers open an education account, which has a different [privacy policy for student data](#).
- Restrict access to their online platforms so that outsiders cannot see the resources that reside there, including students' discussion responses.

Enable security settings on presentation tools:

- As host of a meeting the teacher determines who has access to the meeting and who can control the screen.
- Ensure the video service allows for password-protected meetings so others can't join in if they find (or guess) the meeting ID number
- Students cannot record or snap photos of the virtual classroom.
- Teachers do not share photos of virtual classes online as photos of students, as well as their names, which often appear on their video in a video conference platform, are personal information and privacy laws apply.
- Teacher's re-inforce the MOE's guidelines on use of phones in the classroom - to take a video of an in-class video session is a violation of school policy.
- Seek parent's permission before any recording can be done

5. Internet Safety


The transition to teaching online comes with its own unique set of challenges. Teaching in this way forces teachers to view their instructional and teaching practices differently. One area that will seem more difficult to regulate is the online safety of our students. While in physical school buildings, some aspects of the internet and technology safety are controlled. Security measures and privacy walls requiring student and teacher compliance are put into place. When school occurs at home, we don't have as much control and need to take some precautions to keep our students safe.

Here are some ways teachers ensure our students stay safe and secure online:

- ✚ Students are educated about safe internet practices.
- ✚ The importance of privacy protection [not sharing personal details on social media] are reviewed.
- ✚ Teachers use private online learning platforms.
- ✚ Provide Resources to Students.
- ✚ Teach students how to do research.

RESEARCH
tips for students

- 1 Clarify** What are you looking for? Brainstorm questions, keywords, synonyms.
- 2 Search**
 1. Try simple search terms
 2. Be more specific
 3. Use quotation marks
- 3 Delve** Look beyond the first few results. Consider the URL.
- 4 Evaluate** Don't believe everything you read. Check 2-3 sources.
- 5 Cite** Write information in your own words or quote. Say who/where it's from.

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Here are some ways parents can ensure their child stays safe and secure online:

10 INTERNET SAFETY TIPS FOR PARENTS

1 Don't block all access to technology. Help your child learn to use tech **safely** and **positively**.

2 Take an **interest** in your child's favourite apps or sites. Co-view or co-create at times.

3 Be the parent. You're in charge. Set **boundaries** and consider using filtering software.

4 Create a family media **agreement** with tech free zones such as cars, bedrooms, and meals.

5 Teach your child what **personal information** they should not reveal online (YAPPY acronym).

6 Help your child learn to **filter** information online and navigate fact from fiction.

7 Navigate digital **dilemmas** with your child. Avoid using devices as rewards or punishments.

8 **Balance** green time and screen time at home. Focus on basic developmental needs.

9 Don't support your child to sign up for sites with **age restrictions** (e.g. 13+) if they're underage.

10 **Learn more:** Explore reliable resources for parents so you can educate yourself.

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Internet Safety [continued]

Here are some ways students can ensure they stay safe and secure online:

TIPS FOR STUDENTS

DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP AND INTERNET SAFETY

1 LAWS Many sites and web tools are 13+. Most images and work online are protected by copyright. 	2 TALK Tell your parents what you're doing online. Always ask a trusted adult if you're unsure of anything. 
3 FRIENDS Don't add or meet online friends without parent permission. Don't trust everything friends tell you. 	4 PRIVACY Keep personal info private: Y our full name, A ddress, P hone number, P asswords, Y our plans and birthday. 
5 REPUTATION Don't post anything you wouldn't want teachers, family, friends, and future employers to see. 	6 QUESTION You can't believe everything you read and see online. There's a lot of incorrect and biased info. 
7 BULLYING Tell someone if you think cyberbullying is happening to you or other people you know. 	8 ACCOUNTS Choose sensible email addresses and usernames. Use strong passwords and don't share them with others. 
9 MANNERS Be polite and respectful at all times. Treat others online how you'd like to be treated. 	10 UNPLUG Balance your screen time and green time. Get outdoors, move, play, and interact face to face. 

If in doubt, **think** about and **talk** it out


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Internet Safety [continued]

Here are some ways teachers can ensure they stay safe and secure online:

10 INTERNET SAFETY TIPS FOR TEACHERS

- 1 Don't allow possible problems stop you from **making the most of** technology.
- 2 Be aware of your employer's internet use **guidelines or policies.**
- 3 Develop and publicise **internet use policies** for your staff, students, and families.
- 4 Discuss internet safety with your students **regularly** and **authentically.**
- 5 Be a digital citizenship **role model** including in areas such as research, etiquette, & copyright.
- 6 Take time to find out how students are using the internet **outside of class.**
- 7 Encourage students and parents to **talk** to you if there is a concern about internet safety.
- 8 Use **sensible** email addresses & usernames. Use **privacy** settings & strong **passwords.**
- 9 Don't **put anything online** you wouldn't want your colleagues, family, & friends to see.
- 10 Carefully consider if you want to **connect** with students or parents on **social media.**

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6. Communication

Effectively communicating with students in online classes aids in the retention of our students. As educators, we want to do more than just retain our students. We want to provide them with a sense of community to avoid the sense of isolation that some may experience. The goal of online communications is the same as the goal in face-to-face communications: to bond; to share information; to be heard, and to be understood. Fostering a sense of community in online classes will make the learning experience more meaningful and give students the sense of belonging they feel in the face to face classroom. It's very important for our students to know how we will be communicating with them and how they can communicate with us.

Teachers and students will decide how, when and why they will communicate to ensure the effectiveness of this interaction.

Students will be informed:

- What method their teacher plan to use [**email, text messages, WhatsApp, podcasts, video messages, video conferencing, LMS platform or even phone calls**] to contact them, so that they know where to look for messages.
- How often teachers will communicate with students {will it be bi-weekly, weekly, or once a day?}
- How students will communicate
 - Would the teacher prefer to be contacted via text, messages, email, or phone? Whatever the preferred method of contact, teachers will ensure that it is clearly communicated to students.
 - Messages – Students are encouraged to use the LMS messages function because it provides a permanent record of communications within the class. Students can use this when they need to ask personal or general questions.
 -

Teachers will communicate with parents to give feedback on their child's academic or behavioral progress.

7. Software

In order to see, access, and use all online class materials, students and teachers will need to make sure that their computer has the right software. Computer software enables you to perform specific functions on your computer, such as word processing and internet browsing. Common software programs include:

- computer operating system (which allows you to use your computer easily)
- internet browser (which allows you to surf the web)
- word processor

Hardware and Software Requirements

All departments will collaborate and use common Platforms and Presentation tools so software requirements for all students will be the same.

Hardware Requirements

A basic level of hardware are required in order for all class materials to be accessed properly.

- **Processor:** The processor dictates how fast your computer can perform particular functions
- **Memory:** In order to store information on your computer, including files and software programs, you will need to have a good amount of available memory
- **Disk Drive:** CD-ROM, DVD, or floppy disk drives are necessary in order to download course materials and save information.
- **Modem:** A good internet connection is obviously very important for an online class.
- **Sound Card and Speakers:** In order to hear sound clips on audio and video files, you will need to have a sound card and speakers installed on your computer. You may also want to get some headphones, so only you can hear the sound coming from the computer.

Software Requirements.

Basic software that will be needed for any online class includes:

- **Operating System:** You will need an operating system that is relatively up-to-date.
- **Word Processor:** Most courses will require that you use a word processor to prepare assignments and essays. Microsoft Word is the most commonly-used word processing program although there are others available, such as Word Perfect and AppleWorks.
- **Email Account:** You will need an email account in order to send and receive emails daily. Free accounts are available online.

- **Plug-Ins:** Plug-ins are bits of software that allow you to see, hear, or manipulate an image. Your teacher will provide a list of plug-ins that will allow access to video and audio clips, as well as animation. Plug-ins are usually available through free software downloads on the internet.

Other devices:

Depending on the learning management system being used to conduct the class - materials, multimedia, discussions and assignments can be accessed through tablets and smartphones. While tablets, smartphones and other mobile devices may allow for some participation, they are not guaranteed to work in all areas.

8. Assignment & Feedback

Assignment

Many types of assignments can be done online. As with traditional assignments, teachers can have students cover content and do activities outside of class time so they can spend in-class time in other ways. For example, students can engage in an online discussion and then be able to bring that knowledge to class for a more in-depth discussion. Or a pre-class quiz can highlight problem areas to focus on in class.

Basically, technology can be used to put almost any assignment online. But, there should be a clear pedagogical reason for using them.

The following are some of the reasons for putting an assignment online.

- Allow for new types of assignments
- Allow for collaboration.
- Encourage reluctant participants to contribute
- Accommodate different learning styles and levels.
- Give instant feedback to students.
- Provide students with transferable skills for other classes and in their careers.

The following are some examples (but not limited to) of online assignments, used by teachers:

- Online discussions
- Case studies
- Online tests/quizzes
- Practice exercises
- Virtual tutorials or labs
- Short Stories (submit online)
- Online literature searches
- Simulations
- Games
- Brainstorming
- Art projects
- Presentations
- Reflections

Feedback

Effective feedback is a critical component of the learning process—and for online students especially, it also serves an important role in keeping them motivated and engaged. However, communicating feedback is different between the traditional and virtual learning environment.

As teachers we have the distinct responsibility to nurture a student’s learning and to provide feedback in such a manner that the student does not leave the “classroom” feeling defeated.

Here are some ideas that leave our students with the feeling they can conquer the world.

- Feedback is educative in nature
- Feedback is given in a timely manner.
- Teachers are sensitive to the individual needs of the student.
- Teachers have one-on-one sessions with students
- Genuine praise is given for achievements.

9. Student code of conduct

Although some of our classroom environment is virtual (online), the standards of behavior are as important as they are in the physical setting. In other words, our virtual classrooms are real classrooms with real teachers; therefore, appropriate student behavior is expected. To ensure that all students understand how to behave in an online environment, we have developed a code of conduct that all students are required to follow. This code of conduct addresses student interaction with teachers, and other students, as well as their individual actions.

Interactions with teachers

1. Students should address all teachers with the courtesy expected as outlined in the student handbook.
2. Students should phrase communications with teachers in a polite and courteous manner appropriate for speaking to adults. The tone must be respectful.
3. Since our online environment is a learning environment, students should not use excessive “slang” or language that they might use in other environments.
4. Students are not to use obscene, profane, threatening, or disrespectful language or images in any communications with teachers. {Refer to student handbook}
5. Students must use an email address and profile picture that is appropriate for an educational environment. Email addresses that use profanity or may otherwise be construed as offensive, shall not be permitted in correspondence. Profile pictures on Platforms should not be offensive or inappropriate in any manner. The subject teacher reserves the right to determine if a student’s email address and/or profile picture is inappropriate. Students using an inappropriate email address and/or profile picture will be required to update their user profiles.

In addition, students must NOT:

- Share login credentials with anyone else
- Use anyone else’s login account
- Knowingly upload any file or program that contains a virus, malware or other malicious code
- Engage in bullying or aggressive behavior
- Threaten or intimidate others
- Create a disturbance with interrupts proceedings of a class, or any learning environment.

Interactions with Other students

1. Sending of any unsolicited messages to other classmate is prohibited.
2. All communications with other students in any forum, course related email, discussion post, etc., must be polite, courteous and respectful.
3. The integrity and authenticity of students' work is taken seriously. Copying the work of others, allowing others to knowingly copy a student's work, and/or misusing content from the Internet could result in disciplinary action. Students are expected to abide by copyright laws.
4. Collaborating with other students on online assignments is not recommended unless directed to do so by your teacher. In addition, **parents may not** login to a student's account and complete coursework on behalf of the student.
5. Students are not to use obscene, profane, threatening, or disrespectful language or images in any communications with other students. These actions are prohibited as indicated in the students' handbook and The National School Code of Conduct issued by the Ministry of Education.

Appropriate Use of the Internet

1. Students are subject to all laws governing the Internet. Consequently, administrators will cooperate fully with officials in any investigation related to illegal activities conducted through Internet access.
2. In the event there is a claim that a student has violated this policy, he/she will be notified of the suspected violation and given an opportunity to present an explanation.
3. Any student who violates this policy will be subject to disciplinary action.

Disciplinary Action

Violations to the Student Code of Conduct will initiate the following procedures:

1. Upon the violation, the teacher will alert the relevant Dean or Vice Principal.
2. The student and parent will be notified that he/she violated the code.
3. Based on the report, the Vice Principal/Principal will determine what, if any, disciplinary action must be taken. A violation of the Student Code of Conduct will result in a disciplinary action in line with The National School Code of Conduct issued by the Ministry of Education.

10. Student Support [Psychosocial]

The word ‘psychosocial’ is a combination of the concepts of the individual ‘psyche’ and the ‘social’ community in which the person lives and interacts. Psychosocial support recognizes the importance of the social context in addressing the psychological impact of stressful events experienced in emergencies.

For education professionals, psychosocial work is nothing new – as good teaching and learning practices are good psychosocial practices. Teachers will continue to create a comfortable and supportive learning environment where students feel safe, and recognize that students affected by prolonged disruption of their daily routines may especially need frequent breaks and a nurturing atmosphere to help them recover.

Recognizing that schools are both a place for learning and a place for children to overcome the psychosocial stress of emergencies, the following guidelines can be used to meet the different needs of students.

CHILDREN’S NEEDS	POSSIBLE PSYCHOSOCIAL INTERVENTIONS
A sense of belonging	Establish an educational structure where children feel included.
Relationships with peers	Provide a dependable, interactive routine, through school or other organized educational activity. Offer virtual group and team activities (i.e. sports, drama, etc.) that require cooperation and dependence on one another.
Personal attachments	Provide opportunities for social integration and unity by teaching and showing respect for all, regardless of difference.
Intellectual stimulation	Enhance child development by providing a variety of experiences.
Physical stimulation	Encourage recreational and creative activities, both traditional and new, through games, sports, music, dance, etc.
To feel valued	Create opportunities for expression through group discussions, drawing, writing, drama, etc., which promote self-confidence. Recognize, encourage and praise children.

Source: International Rescue Committee (2003)

Student Support [Psychosocial continued]

In addition the following guidance can be given to students to manage stress and time.

Managing Stress

- Remove yourself from the stressful situation, give yourself a break daily.
- Try to prioritize the truly important things and let the rest slide. Handle each task as it comes.
- Lack of rest aggravates stress, get enough sleep.
- Learn how to best relax yourself through meditation and breathing exercises. This will help to clear your mind from disturbing thoughts.
- Take breaks while studying.
- Do not procrastinate, what you can do today, do not put off for tomorrow.
- Know your stressors, when you do, you will be able to plan strategies to deal with them.
- Establish a network of people who you can go to for advice and assistance.
- Maintain a positive attitude and outlook on life so that you approach situations with passionate devotion and optimism.
- Refute Irrational Thoughts.
- Stop negative thinking and engage in positive self-talk.

Time Management and Study Techniques:

- Create a study timetable and utilize it.
- Attend all online classes.
- Complete all assignments and be sure to meet deadlines.
- Select your best time of day to study (know the time you are most alert)
- Create a space that is conducive to studying, free from excessive noise and distractions.
- Source all materials before studying, e.g. dictionary, highlighter, flash cards, index cards.
- Find the best study method/s for you (know your learning styles).
- Ensure that you eat well and get sufficient rest.
- Manage your time well and **PRIORITIZE**. Do not allow yourself to be distracted by social media.
- Spend adequate time on difficult subjects and concepts.
- Take breaks in between studying.
- Avoid cramming.
- Let others know that this is your study time and respect it.
- Avoid **PROCRASTINATION**.

If you are having difficulties with coping throughout this difficult time, contact your level Dean and he/she will ensure that you receive the appropriate intervention, for the challenges you may be experiencing (referrals to Guidance Officer/Social Worker etc.)

11. Expectations [Student, Teacher, Parent]

Online-Learning-Plan

When the school is closed

The school will provide online learning when there are exceptional circumstances that require the school to close. The following arrangements apply where students, staff and parents are in good health and able to attend to school requirements. While online learning during a school closure will not be able to replicate our practices of onsite learning, our learning programs and communications with students will continue using the tools familiar to students, parents and staff. In general, our Online Learning model will be flexible, acknowledging that students may need to access materials and complete class work at different times to their peers depending on their circumstances. Digital technologies and applications are able to provide sustained elements of curriculum delivery and a means of communication.

Expectations

Should the school need to close, the following expectations of community members will apply.

Students

- Dedicate appropriate time to learning, reflective of a school day including homework and study time, as guided by your teachers. Students may be requested by teachers to virtually attend a “live” online learning event at a set time in order to collaborate with their peers. Students will be provided a minimum of 24 hours’ notice to complete work set by teachers.
- Check their Online Learning Platforms each morning and afternoon for information on subjects, resources and assessment.
- Submit assessments by the due date as communicated by teachers or request extensions using the Online Learning Platform specific to that subject

Teachers

- Provide school work that approaches regular learning time and associated homework and study time.
- Communicate school work regularly in a pattern similar to a student’s timetable, understanding that students may require a minimum of 24 hours’ notice to participate in “live” events should they be scheduled, or to complete set work.
- Should “live” online learning be chosen as a strategy by the teacher, provide resources so that students who are not able to virtually attend or access a live event are catered for. The timetable provides a potential schedule for “live” learning if it is chosen as a strategy.
- Provide regular check-in opportunities for students and be available during regular school hours where possible. Reinforce continued access to online learning with positive feedback.
- Respond to communication from students and parents within a reasonable time.

- Provide feedback within a reasonable time.
- Check Online Learning Platforms regularly.
- Communicate information regularly about assessments to students.

Parents

- Assist students in scheduling appropriate time for learning.
- Ensure that students have access to Online Learning Platforms and Presentation tools.
- Be familiar with the School's Policy and assist students to communicate with teachers as required.
- Communicate with school staff as necessary, allowing staff members a reasonable time to respond.
- Raise questions as required.

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**APPENDIX VIII: NAPSPA’S PROPOSAL FOR DESIGNATED TV
LEARNING CHANNEL**



**NATIONAL PRIMARY SCHOOLS PRINCIPALS’
ASSOCIATION**

**COVID-19 DISRUPTION TO EDUCATION
RESPONSE
PROPOSAL – DESIGNATED TV LEARNING
CHANNEL**

PRIMARY LEVEL CONTENT

DEVELOPED BY

National Primary Schools Principal’s Association (NAPSPA)



**Executive of the National Primary Schools Principal's
Association (NAPSPA)
2018 -2020**

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PROPOSAL TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Background and Rational
2. Objectives of the Creative Learning Channel
3. Description of the Creative Learning Channel Design and
Operational Framework
4. Sample Program Schedule

Televised Teaching/ Learning Project Proposal

CREATIVE LEARNING CHANNEL

PROPOSAL TO MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

**SUBMITTED FRIDAY 24 April 2020 to
Ministers of Education Hon. Mr. A. Garcia and Dr. Hon. L. Francis**

**FORWARDED at Request of Parliamentary Joint Select Committee Chairman
JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE
Social Services and Public Administration
Fri 5th June 2020**

BACKGROUND:

To submit for consideration a proposal for a feasible initiative that utilizes existing technology with extensive dissemination and access potential to engage students during the period April 2020 and onwards as a result of the impact of covid-19 pandemic on Term 3 2019/ 2020 and Term I 2020/ 2021.

TARGET GROUP: Infants to Standard 5 – Primary Schools in Trinidad and Tobago

RATIONALE: This proposal is intended to address the needs of students in the primary school system in Trinidad and Tobago during and possibly beyond the COVID-19 Pandemic. It will cater for all students regardless of their economic status and ensure that all students engage in learning. It will offer a service which may be accessed by the widest number of students across Trinidad and Tobago until the services required for e-Learning have become widely accessible and reasonably provided.

OBJECTIVES OF THE CREATIVE CHANNEL FOR LEARNING:

- To employ resources, equipment, materials and personnel available to effect short to medium term intervention in the provision of Teaching/ Learning to the majority of primary level students in Trinidad and Tobago.
- To deliver standardized delivery of core units of work per subject within the PCR Curriculum.
- To offer the opportunity for students to explore content at home by following televised instructions under the supervision of parents
- To allow teachers the opportunity to support student learning by reinforcing the core units identified and delivered alongside the televised medium.
- To formulate a program in support of the proposal through engagement of all relevant stakeholders in Education.

**DESIGN FRAMEWORK AND OPERATIONAL FACTORS
THE CREATIVE CHANNEL FOR LEARNING**

PLAN		BENEFITS
1	TARGET GROUP	Infants to Standard 5
2	MEDIUM OF COMMUNICATION	Utilization of free-to-air Local TV channels 4 or 9 and 14. Equipment and bandwidth available readily. Therefore everyone can access the tutorials. There is no need for Internet access, cable connection or electronic devices. All that is needed is a television set.
3	DELIVERY/TIME	Utilize Curriculum Officers to record or conduct live tutorials on local Television Channels during school hours – Monday to Friday. Each class level can be time-tabled, coded and published. Coded e.g. Level 1 (Infants) - Lesson #1 code 1001 Level 2 (Infants 2) - Lesson #1 code 2001, Level 3 (Standard 1) - Lesson #1 code 3001 etc.
4	INSTRUCTORS	Utilize Curriculum Officers since they are familiar with the Curriculum Content and were also instrumental in preparing the PCR. This approach would minimize criteria for selecting Instructors.
4	CONTENT	Focus on Mathematics and ELA. Mathematics: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - For all levels, focus on teaching each strand in its entirety. - E.g., Geometry – Teach Geometry in its entirety for the level selected. - This would allow all students to benefit regardless of the level of content covered during Term 1 and 2 for the Academic Year 2019-2020 and beyond. - ELA: Can be taught by topics (Comprehension, Sequencing, Main Idea, etc.) e.g. Vocabulary – Antonyms, Synonyms, etc. Science and Social Studies: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Can be integrated or can be taught through Research and Assignments. VAPA, Physical Education and VCCE:

	PLAN	BENEFITS
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Can be done on a Friday – (Dance/Drama/PE/etc.) (Whole School – all levels can participate at the same time) <p>Multiple Choice Evaluation can also be done at the end of each topic/strand. This would allow for MOE, PARENT AND TEACHERS to monitor and evaluate the programme.</p> <p><u>ADDITIONAL CONTENT –</u> Co-Curricular and National Interest: COVID Sensitization Tips EAP – Support for Teachers Parenting Counselling Support and Tips VAPA Folk tales and Stories Citizenship and Patriotism Home Agriculture projects Tech talk Cyber safety and anti-bullying National History and Culture National Geography and Biodiversity</p>
5	RESOURCES	Whiteboard or Smartboard (available at Education Solution Specialists). Tutors, Recording Studio, Manipulatives (available at all schools)
6	MONITORING	Monitored by the Curriculum Division MOE. Teachers and Principals can also monitor the content covered. Create opportunities (Email or Website) for Teachers and Principals to evaluate, provide feedback, make suggestions, submit lesson plans, suggest strategies, etc. This would allow Teachers and Principals to contribute (voluntary). Teachers can provide follow- up activities for students who have access to internet and electronic devices (voluntary).

	PLAN	BENEFITS
7	DAILY ROLL OUT OF PROGRAMME	<p>Inform Parents, Teachers and Stakeholders of the plan.</p> <p>Create a Time Table (Publish) – Newspaper, Social Media, TV, etc.</p> <p>Have fixed time for tutorials. 9:00 a.m. – 3:00 p.m. Monday to Friday</p> <p>Parents will be responsible for preparing their children to view tutorials.</p> <p>Each class can start with the National School Prayer.</p> <p>SSSD can also provide counselling and support to students (suggested 5 minutes or as the need arises)</p>
8	OTHER BENEFITS	<p>The hidden curricular will not be neglected as students will be required to maintain a daily routine such as getting prepared for tutorials.</p> <p>This plan will also cater for both slow and accelerated students – students can replay or record tutorials as well as benefit from tutorials from the lower or higher levels.</p> <p>Students with electronic device/internet connection can access tutorials anywhere.</p> <p>In Discussions with TTUTA Teachers can provide follow up activities (voluntary)</p> <p>Teachers and Principals can provide feedback/make suggestions through an established website or email address.</p> <p>This programme will offer more structure than providing worksheets to occupy students and will continue to allow teachers to provide the support they are able to give utilizing any e-platform and software they currently have access to and are utilizing.</p> <p>The Programs may also be made available through live streaming further supporting the movement towards online learning</p>

PLAN	BENEFITS
	<p>Tutorials can be recorded /replayed periodically for those who may have missed sessions or require reinforcement</p> <p>Through consultation with local cable and streaming content providers the opportunity to record and replay may also be explored</p> <p>Teachers can volunteer to submit teaching/learning materials to assist tutors.</p> <p>Partner with local print Media to publish the program schedule and summary of lessons and follow up worksheets in consultation with the Ministry of Education and Curriculum Divisions</p> <p>Engagement with stakeholders is critical in moving the proposal forward. As such it is recommended that consideration be given to consultation among but not limited to the MOE, TTUTA, NPTA, APSS, APASS, MATT.</p>

SPECIMEN CREATIVE CHANNEL FOR LEARNING SAMPLE PROGRAM SCHEDULE

LEVEL	TIME	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY
	8:30 a.m. - 8:40 a.m.	National Anthem / School Prayer / Motivational Talk				
INFANT I	8:40 a.m. - 9:00 a.m.	Mathematics	Mathematics	Mathematics	Mathematics	VAPA/VCE/PE
	9:00 a.m. - 9:05 a.m.	BREAK				
	9:05 a.m. - 9:25 a.m.	ELA Grammar	ELA Vocabulary/Spelling	ELA Study Skills	ELA Creative Writing/Reading	VAPA/VCE/PE
INFANT II	9:25 a.m. - 9:50 a.m.	Mathematics	Mathematics	Mathematics	Mathematics	VAPA/VCE/PE
	9:50 a.m. - 9:55 a.m.	BREAK				
	9:55 a.m. - 10:20 a.m.	ELA Grammar	ELA Vocabulary/Spelling	ELA Study Skills	ELA Creative Writing/Reading	VAPA/VCE/PE
STANDARD 1	10:20 a.m. - 10:50 a.m.	Mathematics	Mathematics	Mathematics	Mathematics	VAPA/VCE/PE
	10:50 a.m. - 10:55 a.m.	BREAK				
	10:55 a.m. - 11:25 a.m.	ELA Grammar	ELA Vocabulary/Spelling	ELA Study Skills	ELA Creative Writing/Reading	VAPA/VCE/PE

LEVEL	TIME	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY
STANDARD 2	11:25 a.m. - 11:55 a.m.	Mathematics	Mathematics	Mathematics	Mathematics	VAPA/VCCE/PE
	11:55 a.m. - 12:00 noon	BREAK				
	12:00 noon - 12:30 p.m.	ELA Grammar	ELA Vocabulary/Spelling	ELA Study Skills	ELA Creative Writing/Reading	VAPA/VCCE/PE
STANDARD 3	12:30 p.m. - 1:00 p.m.	Mathematics	Mathematics	Mathematics	Mathematics	VAPA/VCCE/PE
	1:00 p.m. - 1:05 p.m.	BREAK				
	1:05 p.m. - 1:40 p.m.	ELA Grammar	ELA Vocabulary/Spelling	ELA Study Skills	ELA Creative Writing/Reading	VAPA/VCCE/PE
STANDARD 4	1:40 p.m. - 2:15 p.m.	Mathematics	Mathematics	Mathematics	Mathematics	VAPA/VCCE/PE
	2:15 p.m. - 2:20 p.m.	BREAK				
	2:20 p.m. - 3:00 p.m.	ELA Grammar	ELA Vocabulary/Spelling	ELA Study Skills	ELA Creative Writing/Reading	VAPA/VCCE/PE
STANDARD 5	3:00 p.m. - 3:40 p.m.	Mathematics	Mathematics	Mathematics	Mathematics	Mathematics
	3:40 p.m. - 3:45 p.m.	BREAK				
	3:45 p.m. - 4:20 p.m.	ELA	ELA	ELA	ELA	ELA
	4:20 p.m. - 4:30 p.m.	Examination Strategies & Preparation				

