Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago
MINISTRY OF EDUCATION
Education Towers, No.5 St. Vincent Street, Port of Spain, Trinidad

Joint Select Committee on Human Rights, Equality and Diversity:

Request for Information

The Fifteenth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Human Rights, Equality and Diversity on the Current Provisions for the Education of Children who require Special Education Programmes and Services in Public Primary and Secondary Schools

4.29 The Committee recommends that the Central Statistical Office, MoE and MSDFS collaborate to develop a definition for 'disability' as soon as possible. The use of a consistent definition for 'disability' would contribute to the accurate collection of data from CSO, MoE and MSDFS for the formulation and implementation of policies in accordance with Article 31(1) of the UNCRPD.

The MoE endorses the Committee's recommendation to expediently develop a definition for 'disability' to enable the accurate collection of data and the formulation and implementation of policies. Towards this end the Ministry has submitted proposed suggestions for a review of the definition of 'disability' and related concepts to the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. We are also in dialogue with the Ministry of Planning and Development and the Central Statistical Office, to explore /and possibly expand their interpretation to ensure greater inclusivity. It is our intention to continue dialogue with these and other relevant stakeholders.

4.30 Given that the highest number of diagnosed and suspected disability cases are within the Port of Spain, St. George East, North East and Caroni education districts, the committee recommends increased screening be conducted by the MOH in collaboration with the MOE within these districts by June 2020. This should be accompanied by a public relations campaign to encourage parents to have their children screened within these districts.

The MOE supports this Committee's recommendation for increased screening of students, in all education districts with priority given to the Port-of-Spain, St. George East, North Eastern, and Caroni education districts, given the prevalence of diagnosed and suspected disability cases.

The Ministry recognises the need for urgent collaboration with the MoH to successfully screen children for disabilities. The MOE has identified specific areas in which this collaboration is required inclusive of protocols for communication and information sharing, client referral and ease of access to medical records for clients to support the screening and intervention process. Currently, this collaboration exists through the facilitation of the School Health Programme where MoH screens (vision and hearing) students on entry into primary schools. A list of students identified as having concerns is then sent to the MoE. The SSSD then investigates and provides the necessary supports for these students. The MoE through its Special Education Unit also conducts academic screening of students in the third term of their second year of primary school. The expansion of such screening initiatives to include all schools is dependent upon the increased recruitment and assignment of special education personnel.

The MOE will also initiate a public education programme for parents highlighting the need for and benefits of early and regular screening and follow-up for general health and sensory challenges.

4.31 The Committee commends the MOE's proposal to commence screening for disabilities from the ECCE level and the Committee recommends that the screening incorporate the use of structured screening tools and the input of health care providers inclusive of medical staff trained to properly identify developmental gaps in children.

The need for standardised and structured screening instruments is recognized as a priority for the realisation of the goals of any early intervention project. Instruments have been identified for use but the finances to acquire such have not been available thus far. Additionally, finances will be required to pilot test and adapt these instruments to make them culturally appropriate.

The MOE also recognises the potential for collaboration with the MOH and trained medical personnel in this venture. The input of the MOH in the early identification of developmental gaps in children will be invaluable to a national early childhood screening and intervention programme. In particular, the MOE requires the support of the MOH in "flagging" and referring children with developmental delays and disabilities. Protocols for the automatic transfer of such information via the enhancement of the existing developmental profile and its inclusion on the Immunisation Record will also be considered for presentation upon registration at the ECCE and primary levels.

4.32 Given that multiple disabilities was the highest diagnosed disability at the primary school level, the Committee concurs with CODO and recommends additional specialized training for Special Education Teachers which is centered on not only single disabilities but multiple disabilities.

Special Education Teachers with a degree in Special Education are trained in aetiology, which enables them to identify the characteristics of different disabilities and select general strategies for addressing the more common areas of disability e.g. learning disabilities. Such officers are also exposed to general strategies for addressing the functional needs of students with multiple disabilities. The MoE however, welcomes the recommendation for additional specialised training in areas such as meeting the needs of students with communication challenges (e.g. Sensory Disabilities and Speech and Language Disorders, Developmental Disabilities) where there is a dearth of trained staff. The Ministry also endorses the recommendation of CODO and the Committee to expand opportunities for targeted and ongoing professional development of special education personnel. In particular we recommend the revitalisation of scholarship opportunities for special education teachers in specialist areas of need.

4.33 Although the Inclusive Education Policy and Circular Memorandum No. 2 of 2019 were developed with the intent to mitigate the discriminatory acceptance of children at the primary level, there continues to be cases where a child is denied an opportunity to register at a public school. Therefore, Committee recommends that the MOE develop a stringent monitoring mechanism to eliminate all cases where a child with a disability is denied entry to the public primary and secondary school of their choice.

Goal 5.6 of The Draft Special Education Policy articulates the intent "to provide an effective mechanism for accountability and redress for families of children with special education needs" (p.10). Officers from the Special Education Unit function as advocates for all students with disabilities seeking entry into all public schools at all levels of the system. Reports of non-admission of students with disabilities into public schools are investigated and appropriate interventions are made in the interest of the student. These interventions may include:

- representation to the School Supervision and Management Division and principal on behalf of the student based on the right of access for students with disabilities to "free public education";
- the provision of appropriate support personnel e.g. Student Aides, Interpreters, etc. as are available;
- negotiation for the upgrade adjustment of physical facilities/accommodation; and
- sensitisation and education sessions to foster increased acceptance.

The MOE has an Admission policy which provides the requirements for admission to schools at the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) and primary levels. Children are admitted once they meet the criteria.

At this time the Special Education Unit is drafting a Circular Memorandum to be issued to principals to ensure adherence to the policies of the MoE and to ensure that children are not denied entry to public schools based on the presence or perception of a disability.

The Ministry is also proposing that an inter-ministerial committee should be established to design and deliver Public Education Programmes to educate parents of their rights and the right of their children, with and without disabilities, to compulsory education. The MoE maintains the status of universal compulsory education and supports the right of access to "free public education" but notes that accommodation is limited at some schools, and as such, the MoE may not be able to guarantee placement at any school "of the parent's choice". The inclusive schools project however, will facilitate the outfitting of three schools in each education district to meet the needs of students with special education needs.

4.34 Given stakeholder concerns in relation to the application requirements and the lack of standard provisions for examination concessions, the Committee recommends that the MOE publishes the examination concession application guidelines and the current concession provision on the Ministry's website in an accessible multimedia format as soon as possible.

Every year a Circular Memorandum with the deadline date and application form for the provision of Alternative Arrangements (Special Concessions) for All Local Examinations, is issued to registered private and public schools. Personnel at schools are therefore aware of the requirements for applying for concessions and they are charged with the responsibility of informing parents and completing the process. The MOE will however, publish the complete Guidelines for the Provision of Alternative Arrangements (Special Concessions) for Local Examinations on the MoE's website by the 30th July, 2020. This will allow all stakeholders to be privy to the information ahead of the deadline for applications for the 2021 national examinations (SEA, PSLCE, NCSE).

4.35 Given the different views expressed by the MOE and CODO in relation to the qualification requirements for a Special Education Teacher Aide, the Committee recommends that the MOE conducts a consultation sessions with disability stakeholders, in order to achieve consensus on the qualification requirements for a Special Education Teacher Aide.

The MOE worked with disability stakeholders previously to develop Standards for training of Special Education Needs Assistants under the National Training Agency (NTA). Stakeholders in the area of Special Education will also be engaged, as recommended, to gain consensus on the required qualification and levels of training of these paraprofessionals.

Prior to the launch of the Inclusive Schools Project, the MoE held three (3) focused consultations targeted towards internal, external (NGOs and Advocacy groups), and inter-ministerial stakeholders in November, 2019. At these fora the qualification requirements of Special Education Student Aides were raised and as a result, the SSSD is designing a training programme for Special Education Student Aides which is expected to commence by August, 2020. A proposal is also being developed for the provision of a similar certified programme via the main tertiary level institutions involved in teacher preparation and education. This Certificate Level Training, when implemented, will serve as the basic requirement for Special Education Student Aides.

4.36 The Committee recommends that the MOE continues its efforts to fill contract and permanent vacancies with specific reference to the positions of Special Education Teacher I, Special Education Teacher Aide, Special Education Instructor, Interpreter Assistant, Senior Special Education Instructor, Clinical Psychologist and Behavioural Specialist in Appendix V.

The MOE endorses the Committee's recommendation and continues to work assiduously towards the recruitment of qualified personnel to fill the vacancies in the Special Education Unit. This recommendation is pivotal to the achievement of the stated goals of the MOE with reference to our students with special education needs.

4.37 Given stakeholder recommendations (Appendix X) by the TTBWA, Dyslexia Association, TTAHI, Support Autism T&T to enhance curriculum delivery, the Committee recommends that during the MOE's review of the delivery of the national curriculum (articulated in the National Policy on PwDs) that the MOE conducts a consultation session with disability stakeholders to ensure that the curriculum delivery is inclusive for persons with disabilities.

The MOE acknowledges the need for consultation and collaboration with disability stakeholders in education during the proposed review of the delivery of the national curriculum. To this end the Ministry proposes to fill the existing vacancy for a Special Education Curriculum Officer to advise on issues of curricula modification/adaptation to facilitate the needs of learners with disabilities. The MOE will continue to engage general education teachers on the concept and application of principles of Universal Design for Learning and Response to Intervention of Instruction/Learning so that they have a basic understanding of strategies for adapting the curriculum for students with special needs.

4.38 The Committee reiterates the importance of the full implementation of the nine (9) ongoing policy actions in the Education Paper 2017 to 2022 (Appendix XI) as it impacts the ability of a child that requires special education programme and services. The committee reiterates the implementation of the following policy actions as soon as possible:

- **Upgrades to physical facilities, post teacher training programmes inclusive of clinical supervision;**
- **Develop and institute the use of protocol to govern the placement of students with special educational needs;**
- **Designate specific schools within each Education District to facilitate students whose special education needs are identified as requiring additional support not available in regular schools;**
- **Continue to provide financial support to special needs students in accordance with established policy;**
- **Continue to facilitate diagnostic testing at the Primary level to ensure that students receive requisite, prompt remedial interventions;**
- **Facilitate the provision of specialized Aids at Primary schools where necessary to allow such students to benefit from the education system;**
- **Develop and institute special provisions for students with special education needs to facilitate the evaluation and assessment process;**
- **Ensure that the curriculum is accessible for students with special education needs;**
- **Ensure the provision of Learning tools and materials to facilitate students with special education needs.**

The MOE agrees with the recommendation that emphasis be placed on continuing the full implementation of the policy actions outlined in Appendix XI of the Education Policy Paper 2017-2022. The Ministry is committed to consistently monitoring our progress in achieving the required deliverables that would facilitate the full realisation of the stated goals and policy actions.

4.39 The committee recommends that the MOE, MSDFS, MOH and MAGLA review the stakeholder challenges and recommendations in and Appendix X respectively with a view to incorporating same into the implementation of future policy action.

With reference to the above, the Ministry is committed to reviewing the stakeholder challenges and recommendations in Appendix X, in collaboration with MSDFS, MOH and MAGLA, with a view to incorporating same into the implementation of future policy actions.