

**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

*Friday, November 22, 2024*

The House met at 1.30 p.m.

**PRAYERS**

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

**LEAVE OF ABSENCE**

**Madam Speaker:** Hon. Members, I have received communication from Mr. Rushton Paray MP, Member for Mayaro and from Mr. Davendranath Tancoo MP, Member for Oropouche West who have requested leave of absence from today's sitting of the House. The leave which the Members seek is granted.

**PAPERS LAID**

1. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Sugar Industry Labour Welfare Committee for the year ended September 30, 2006. [*The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert)*]
2. Administrative Report of the Export-Import Bank of Trinidad and Tobago Limited (Eximbank) as at December 31, 2022. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
3. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Environmental Management Authority–Environmental Trust Fund for the year ended September 30, 2023. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
4. Report on the Operations of the National Insurance Board of Trinidad and Tobago and the Audited Financial Statements for the Financial Year ended June 30, 2024. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]

**UNREVISED**

*Papers 1, 3 and 4 to be referred to the Public Accounts Committee.*

5. Annual Administrative Report of the Arima Borough Corporation for the period October 01, 2017 to September 30, 2018. [*The Minister of Rural Development and Local Government (Hon. Faris Al-Rawi SC)*]
6. Annual Administrative Report of the Arima Borough Corporation for the period October 01, 2019 to September 30, 2020. [*Hon. F. Al-Rawi SC*]
7. Sessional Report of the Fourth Session (2023/2024), Twelfth Parliament of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. [*The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Esmond Forde)*]
8. Annual Report on Trafficking in Persons in Trinidad and Tobago for the year 2016. [*The Minister of Housing and Urban Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis)*]
9. Annual Report on Trafficking in Persons in Trinidad and Tobago for the year 2017. [*Hon. C. Robinson-Regis*]
10. Annual Report on Trafficking in Persons in Trinidad and Tobago for the year 2018. [*Hon. C. Robinson-Regis*]
11. Annual Report on Trafficking in Persons in Trinidad and Tobago for the year 2019. [*Hon. C. Robinson-Regis*]
12. Annual Report on Trafficking in Persons in Trinidad and Tobago for the year 2020. [*Hon. C. Robinson-Regis*]
13. Annual Report on Trafficking in Persons in Trinidad and Tobago for the year 2021. [*Hon. C. Robinson-Regis*]
14. Annual Report on Trafficking in Persons in Trinidad and Tobago for the year 2022. [*Hon. C. Robinson-Regis*]

**URGENT QUESTIONS**

**Madam Speaker:** Member for Couva South.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**University of the West Indies St. Augustine Campus  
(Measures to Avoid Complete Shutdown)**

**Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh** (*Couva South*): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Question to the Minister of Education: Will the Minister inform this House of the urgent measures which are being pursued by the Government to avoid a complete shutdown of the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine campus given the rejection of the Government's 2 per cent for the collective bargaining period 2015—2017 by the West Indies Group of University Teachers?

**Madam Speaker:** The Minister of Education.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Mr. Imbert:** I will answer it.

**Madam Speaker:** The Minister of Finance is taking the question?

**Mr. Imbert:** Yeah.

**Madam Speaker:** Minister of Finance.

**The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert):** Madam Speaker, it is necessary to put some historical facts into perspective. Over the period August 2011 to July 2014, the then ministerial committee, under the previous Administration, approved a 10 per cent adjustment in compensation for academic and senior staff at the University of the West Indies, represented by the West Indies Group of University Teachers (WIGUT). It was a 4 per cent salary adjustment followed by an additional 6 per cent distributed as follows. From 2011, a one per cent increase—an additional

one per cent on top of the four; from 2012 July, another 1 per cent on top of the original 4 per cent; and from 2013, a further 4 per cent on top of the original 4 per cent, totalling a 10 per cent adjustment between 2011 and 2014.

The Government has since extended its 4 per cent offer that has been made to the public service and the protective services and has been accepted by several of the protective services for the periods 2014–2017 and 2017–2020, to WIGUT. I am advised that WIGUT refused to consider the last period, 2017–2020 and has not accepted the offer for the period 2014–2017. I am told that WIGUT is asking for the following. With effect from July 2014, 8 per cent; with effect from July 2015, another 8 per cent; and with effect from 2016, another 8 per cent. A total of 24 per cent for the period 2014–2017. The recurrent cost of the proposal from WIGUT is estimated at an additional \$78 million per annum for the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine campus with—

**Madam Speaker:** Hon. Minister, your time is now spent. Member for Couva South.

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Madam Speaker, given not the historical context but the current reality of the cost of living in this country, and taking into consideration that negotiations have been settled with the Mona and Cave Hill campuses long after St. Augustine commenced, Minister could you give us a time frame that you expect that these negotiations would be completed?

**Madam Speaker:** Minister of Finance.

**Hon. C. Imbert:** First, let me correct the statement in the question, which sort of implied, insinuated or said outright, that there would be a total collapse of the St. Augustine campus. I do not think so. I think that is just

alarmist wording from the Member for Couva South.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. C. Imbert:** It is necessary for me to state what is happening in Trinidad and Tobago because any revenue generated in Jamaica and Barbados and any expenditure in Barbados and Jamaica are totally and wholly irrelevant to our situation in Trinidad. If we were to accept the proposal from WIGUT, the back pay would be \$701 million as at March 2024. The cost of the 4 per cent offer, which we have offered to everybody else and which is being accepted by most trade unions is estimated at back pay of \$79 million and \$12 million in additional recurrent expenditure. It is no secret, the Member can pretend otherwise, that the UWI is funded by the State with hundreds of millions of dollars in subventions.

For the 2018–2019 year, the government subvention was \$517 million; for the 2019 to 2020 year, \$520 million; for 2020/2021, \$528 million. Therefore, any settlement of wages at the UWI will place the responsibility on the Government and taxpayers to fund this increase. I do not think it is prudent to impose a burden of back pay of \$701 million on the taxpayers of Trinidad and Tobago. There are means of settling disputes, there are dispute resolution procedures and I would urge all parties to utilize the available dispute resolution procedures.

**Madam Speaker:** Minister, your time is now spent.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*].

**Madam Speaker:** Member for Couva South.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Minister, given your pleadings as it relates to the social dialogue process, could you assure this House if there is an agreement,

bilaterally, between WIGUT and the employer, that there will be no ministerial or Cabinet interference, as what took place at the port and NIB.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. C. Imbert:** Madam Speaker, the Member for Couva South has a way with words. I do not know what pleading he is talking about. We are not in court. I did not make any pleadings. I have not made any submissions.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Mr. Indarsingh:** [*Inaudible*]

**Hon. C. Imbert:** Madam Speaker, it is ridiculous for the Member opposite to ask taxpayers of this country to fund a settlement in a wage matter, which is funded by the taxpayers. The Government has to fund the UWI. Even this 4 per cent offer will cost the Government \$79 million. It is absurd and I know that the former UNC Government did not—

**Hon. Member:** [*Inaudible*]

**Madam Speaker:** Member, please allow the Minister to respond. Minister, please.

**Hon. C. Imbert:** Madam Speaker, it is absurd. I know that the former UNC Government did not do that. They did not allow statutory authorities and state enterprises to just give away “de” shop on a 25 per cent increase, 50 per cent increase, 75 per cent increase without any ministerial intervention. There was a ministerial committee under the UNC Government and we followed them. We have simply changed the name. It is called the Human Resource Advisory Committee but it is the same committee. It is chaired by corporation sole and has a number of Ministers that look at the impact of wage settlements on the Treasury. So, the Member for Couva South is fooling no one. It is not ministerial interference or

intervention. It is a question of affordability. You cannot have a state enterprise or statutory authority just lumping \$700 million in back pay on the taxpayers of this country.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

### ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

**Madam Speaker:** Leader of the House.

**The Minister of Housing and Urban Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis):** Thank you again, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, there are three questions for oral response and we will be answering all three.

### ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

**Madam Speaker:** Member for Mayaro.

#### Cyber Breach at the SWRHA

##### (Details of)

- 23. Mr. David Lee (*Pointe-a-Pierre*):** Thank you, Madam Speaker. On behalf of the Member for Mayaro, asked the Minister of Health:
- With regard to the recent cyber breach at the SWRHA, will the Minister:
- a) provide an update on the investigation;
  - b) advise what steps have been taken to secure the Authority's online systems; and
  - c) indicate what measures will be undertaken by the Ministry to ensure that its cybersecurity protocols can address emerging threats?

**Madam Speaker:** Minister of Health.

**The Minister of Health (Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh):** Thank you very

much, Madam Speaker. A: In the immediate aftermath of the cyber-attack on October 23, 2023, the Trinidad and Tobago Cyber Security Incident Response Team (CSIRT), investigated and provided a brief on the incident. The matter was also reported to the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service Cyber and Social Media Unit. I am advised that the TTPS's investigation is still ongoing.

B: The South-West Regional Health Authority indicated that a multilayered approach to safeguard this information communication technology infrastructure was implemented and the details include:

1. The deployment of end-point detection and response solutions across all devices on the network for real-time monitoring, detection and response to suspicious activity on each end-point, thus significantly reducing the risk of system compromise.
2. The strengthening of network security to limit access and enhance controls around sensitive data, reducing the potential impact of unauthorized access.
3. The installation of internal and external firewalls to bolster defences against external and internal threats.
4. The enhancement of access tools and authentication mechanisms to allow stricter access control for authorized personnel.

**1.45 p.m.**

5. The sensitization and cyber security for staff for identifying phishing attempts, understanding emerging threats and following protocols to secure systems, and;
6. The update of the backup and disaster recovery plan to ensure



continuity of service in the event of any system disruption.

- C. The Ministry of Health is in the process of enhancing its cyber security posture and associated protocols utilizing risk assessment and mitigation strategies recommended by the Trinidad and Tobago Cyber Security Incident Response Team, C-SIRT. It is also collaborating with the Ministry of Digital Transformation to ensure alignment with national cyber security policies, strategies and frameworks. Following the cyber security breach incident at the South-West Regional Health Authority, the Ministry of Health engaged C-SIRT to conduct cyber security gap assessments to provide recommendations to address any weaknesses or risks uncovered across all RHAs.

Subsequently, each of the four RHAs developed a security upgrade plan based on the outcomes of the security gap assessment report and the recommendations provided within the report. The security upgrade plan for each of the four RHAs was submitted to the Ministry of Digital Transformation for their review and comments. Based on the results of the assessment report the following are being implemented to strengthen the cyber security system against emerging threats:

1. Each RHA in Trinidad has updated its security plan inclusive of the cyber security framework to identify, protect, detect, respond and recover from any unforeseen threat. The procurement of software and hardware to assist with this security upgrade across the four RHAs has commenced.
2. The initial phase of the firewall upgrades across the RHAs has started with the procurement of additional firewall systems to

ensure full network coverage.

3. The implementation of safety information and event management solutions at each RHA to assist in recognizing and addressing potential security threats and vulnerabilities.
4. The implementation of privileged access management system, and multifactor authentication systems across the RHAs to safeguard their critical assets by enforcing strict control for authorized personnel and;
5. The upgrade of backup and recovery solution plans to ensure business continuity.

Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Madam Speaker:** Member for Caroni East.

**Dr. Secheran:** Thank you, Madam Speaker. Minister, given the new recommendations and protocols that you have just listed, are you confident that all four regional health authorities can now withstand a similar cyber security attack should it occur now or in the near future?

**Madam Speaker:** Minister of Health.

**Hon. T. Deyalsingh:** I am confident that all reasonable steps have been taken. But as you know, in this world of cyber security, there can be no absolute guarantees, but I am confident that we have taken all reasonable steps.

**Madam Speaker:** Member for Pointe-a-Pierre.

### **Chemistry, Food and Drug Division**

#### **(Improper use of Pesticides and Inadequate Testing Equipment)**

**24. Mr. David Lee** (*Pointe-a-Pierre*) on behalf of Mr. Rushton Paray (*Mayaro*) asked the hon. Minister of Health:

In light of the improper use of pesticides and the inadequate testing equipment at the Chemistry, Food and Drug Division, will the Minister advise:

- a) what measures are being undertaken to upgrade the laboratories to ensure proper regulation of food, drugs and toxic chemicals;
- b) how does the Ministry intend to address the backlog and delays in drug registration and inspection;
- c) whether there are any plans to supplement funding through external partnerships or international assistance, to remedy its limited human and technological resources; and
- d) what specific measure are being put in place to enhance regulatory oversight?

**Madam Speaker:** Minister of Health.

**The Minister of Health (Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh):** Thank you again. The Ministry of Health has upgraded the laboratory facilities at the Chemistry, Food and Drug Division by procuring equipment and consumables and conducting relevant training in the use of specific analytical instrumentation. Further, the serviceable equipment was repaired and non-serviceable or obsolete equipment was replaced through the procurement of the following items:

The gas chromatography-mass spectrometer instrument, analytical balance device, centrifuge device, photometer, refractometer, spectroscopy system, laboratory ovens, digital hotplates, incubators, sterilizers, microscopes,

mixers, refrigerators and freezers and a multi-unit extraction heater. As of November 06, 2024, the number of tests conducted at each laboratory are as follows: One, 29 at the drug laboratory, 238 at the food chemistry lab and 49 at the microbiology laboratory. As of November 18, 2024, I am advised that all drug registration applications are current as required by the Food and Drugs Act Chap. 30:01, where the applicant shall be notified of the status of the application by 180 days. There is no backlog. During the period January to November 18, 2024, 831 drug applications were received of which 503 applications were approved by the Drug Advisory Committee of which 270 are in the process of being gazetted.

1. From October to November 18, 2024, 141 applications were received, pre-screened, and are currently undergoing a detailed assessment. This means a detailed review of the dossiers is being conducted to ensure the applications meet the required safety, quality, and efficacy before submission to the Drug Advisory Committee for final review. These drug applications are anticipated to be considered at the next sitting of the Drug Advisory Committee number 245. These Drug Advisory Committee meetings are held monthly or as required and the last meeting was held on November 14, 2024.

One hundred and twenty-six applications were deferred to applicants requiring additional information. Sixty-one applications were rejected for not meeting the requirements. So all applications that have conformed to the documentation required, have been approved.

Regarding drug inspections, the Chemistry, Food and Drug Division and the Drug Inspectorate, Ministry of Health routinely conducts inspections

as required. The Ministry of Health continues to liaise with its external partners for any technical resources needed to strengthen our regulatory system and laboratories. For instance, in the past assistance was sought for the following:

1. In 2020, the expert review of Trinidad and Tobago's pharmaceuticals registration process was conducted by a consultant through the British High Commission and;
2. In 2023 and 2024 respectively, the International Atomic Energy Agency, IAEA project for technical cooperation donated the following equipment:
  - i. The nuclear magnetic resonance spectrometer that is being used for food testing.
  - ii. The gas chromatography instrument currently being commissioned to be used to enhance the analytical capabilities of the laboratory in particular for pesticide residue analysis in foods.

D. The specific measures in place to improve regulatory oversight include:

1. The use of the Ministry of Trade and Industry's portal, TTBizLink to facilitate the ease of doing business and improved vigilance as it relates to the requirements for customs entries via an e-goods declaration for the importation of articles such as food, drugs, and cosmetic and devices. This allows for greater efficiency in the assessment of these applications by the food and drugs inspectors for compliance with the regulatory requirements

and standards, including but not limited to licences and permits.

2. The ongoing recruitment and training of staff to ensure greater market surveillance at supermarkets, pharmacies—

**Madam Speaker:** Minister, your time is now spent. Member for Caroni East.

**Dr. Seecheran:** Thank you, Madam Speaker. Minister, thank you for your response. Minister, given the question is about backlog and delays, has any provision been made for an increased allocation to the human resources capacity of the Chemistry, Food and Drug Division?

**Madam Speaker:** Minister.

**Hon. T. Deyalsingh:** It is a pity that my colleague did not listen to the answer and I was at pains to pause and say there is no backlog. The applications that have not been approved, have not been approved because of a lack of documentation from the importer, but we keep on saying there is a backlog. Let me make it clear, there is no backlog of applications for registrations of drugs once the applicant has provided all the information required, 126 applications were deferred to applicants requiring additional information, and I said that clearly. I also said, 61 applications were rejected for not meeting the requirements. So your question about additional resources to clear a backlog does not arise, because there is no backlog.

**Madam Speaker:** Member for Caroni East.

**Dr. Seecheran:** Minister, has there been any change in the requirement for documentation to the Chemistry, Food and Drug Division because what I have been told is that the applications—

**Madam Speaker:** Member. Member, it is a question. So you have asked the question. And what I want to say is, having regard to the question asked and answer given, this question does not arise. Member for Mayaro.

**Development Centre for Persons with Disabilities  
(Measures to be taken)**

**25. Mr. David Lee** (*Pointe-a-Pierre*) on behalf of Mr. Rushton Paray (*Mayaro*) asked the hon. Minister of Social Development and Family Services:

With regard to the Development Centre for Persons with Disabilities, will the Minister advise:

- a) what measures are being taken to ensure that its services will be accessible to all persons with disabilities, including those in remote or underserved communities;
- b) what measures will be implemented to ensure that persons with disabilities –
  - i. will receive comprehensive care; and
  - ii. be provided with opportunities for social integration?

**Madam Speaker:** Minister of Social Development and Family Services.

**The Minister of Housing and Urban Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis):** Madam Speaker, on behalf of the Minister of Social Development and Family Services, the National Therapeutic and Resource Centre will serve as a unique multidisciplinary medical facility to address the needs of persons with disabilities nationwide. To fulfil this mandate a referral-based system will be utilized to accommodate patients from all regional health authorities in the country.

At, present, there are 102 primary health care centres and 13 hospitals. It is envisaged that this network of health facilities will be extensive enough to provide the requisite number of referrals to the centre. A multidisciplinary team of specialized professionals will staff the facility ensuring the provision of comprehensive and integrated therapies across the following domains or specialties, physical medicine and rehabilitation, developmental and behavioural paediatrics, physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech and language pathology, behavioural psychotherapy, general medicine, nutrition and dietetics, nursing, aqua therapy, music and art.

Madam Speaker, a daily living suite will be available to train and enable persons to develop the appropriate daily living skills. Furthermore, a resource room with a smart lab will also be on site to strengthen functional capacities, that is to say, technical and ICT skills.

Additionally, parents and caregivers will be trained to provide home-based care thereby establishing a continuum of care which will further enhance the rehabilitation process. The above interventions combined with the therapeutic services will build capacity in persons with disabilities to engage in independent daily living activities, thus enabling opportunities for social integration. Thank you very kindly, Madam Speaker.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**2.00 p.m.**

**Madam Speaker:** Leader of the House.

**The Minister of Housing and Urban Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis):** Once again, thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 126 and with your leave, there



has been agreement to allow the Minister of Finance to speak until the conclusion of this statement.

**Madam Speaker:** Hon. Members, I am informed that there has been agreement between the Leader of the House and the Whip to allow the Minister of Finance to speak until the conclusion of his statement. Minister of Finance.

### **STATEMENT BY MINISTER**

#### **Operations of the National Insurance Board**

**The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert):** Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. C. Imbert:** I am authorized by Cabinet to make this statement on the operations of the National Insurance Board of Trinidad and Tobago, NIBTT, and audited financial statements for the financial year ended June 30, 2024, on time. Section 13(2) of the National Insurance Act, Chap. 32:01, states that:

“Subject to subsection (3), the Board shall within three months of the end of each financial year make a report of its proceedings and of the operation of this Act in respect of that financial year to the Minister who shall, within two months of receipt of such report, lay before Parliament.”

Today, I would like to outline to this House some of the main highlights of this report. Key operational statistics, as prescribed by section 13(2A) of the Act, during the financial year ended June 30, 2024, for the NIB are as follows—2023, sorry, are as follows.

The report noted that the financial year July 01, 2023, through June

30, 2024, was a period of significant institutional development for the NIB, as the year was marked by considerable organizational progress, with the completion of key milestones in the NIB's EMPOWER digital transformation project, including the beginning of the design and testing phase. All modules of the project are on pace to be fully operationalized within the financial year of 2024/2025. There was a strengthening of business activity in the non-energy sector, with increased economic activity in the construction, agriculture and manufacturing sectors. However, despite this increased economic activity, there was a slight decrease in the number of contributors within the NIS in 2024.

Madam Speaker, the NIB was the target of a ransomware attack on December 27, 2023. However, subsequent forensic analysis by the NIB's cybersecurity specialists revealed that no evidence of data exfiltration and no expected risk to sensitive customer information held by the NIB. This event proved to be a catalyst for the NIB to reinforce its systems by re-evaluating its cybersecurity strategies and fortifying its defences.

During the year ended June 30, 2024, the number of new employers registering with the NIB increased by just 0.55 per cent to 1,647, from 1,638 in 2023. The active employer population increased by 1.05 per cent to 19,341 in 2024, from 19,140 in 2023.

With respect to employee registration, 25,575 applications for processing in the financial year were determined. Of these, 19,830 or 77.5 per cent were new insured persons added to the database in 2024, an increase of 296 or 1.5 per cent, when compared with the 19,534 new registrants in 2023.

In the area of benefit administration, as at June 30, 2024, 226,618 beneficiaries received a total of \$6.5 billion in benefit payments, which represented an increase in expenditure of 5.45 per cent over the \$6.164 billion recorded in the previous period. The number of long-term beneficiaries increased by 3.49 per cent to 202,608 persons in 2024, from 195,859 persons in 2023. Payment to this group, long-term beneficiaries, totalled \$6.232 billion or 95.9 per cent of the total benefit expenditure recorded in 2024, an increase over the \$5.880 billion of the total benefited expenditure recorded in 2023.

The retirement pension accounted for the largest component of long-term benefits, totalling \$5.2 billion or 83.45 per cent of long-term benefit expenditure. The number of short-term beneficiaries decreased by 14.6 per cent, from 23,292 in 2023, to 19,877 in 2024.

Payments to short-term beneficiaries totalled \$193.5 million or 2.98, basically 3 per cent, of total benefit expenditure. This represents a decrease of 3.4 per cent from \$211.9 million in the financial year 2023.

Recipients of funeral grants accounted for the largest portion: 47.5 per cent of short-term beneficiaries, while the maternity benefit accounted for a high percentage of short-term benefit expenditure, 43 per cent.

With regard to employment injury benefits, payments totalled \$74.2 million or 1.14 per cent of total benefit expenditure. This represents an increase of 3.32 per cent over the total employment injury benefit expenditure for 2023 of \$71.9 million. There was a 1.82 per cent decrease in the number of beneficiaries from 4,130 in 2023, to 4,055 in 2024. Employment injury beneficiaries accounted for just 1.8 per cent of the total

number of beneficiaries.

Madam Speaker, contribution income collected for the year ended June 2024 was \$4,748.9 billion, a total of \$348 million above the budgeted estimate of \$4.4 billion. Let me just repeat that. Contribution income collected for the year ended June 2024 was \$4.75 billion, a total of \$348 million above—\$348.9 million above the budgeted estimate of \$4.4 billion.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. C. Imbert:** Income from penalties and interest amounted to \$13 million, an increase of \$1.3 million from the \$11.7 million collected in 2023.

In the area of investment, as at June 30, 2024, the market value of the investment portfolio of the NIB was \$27 billion, reflecting a \$950 million or 3.38 per cent decline over the fund size as at June 30, 2023. The decline in the portfolio's market value was mainly attributable to approximately \$370 million in unrealized losses, as well as the withdrawal of \$1.96 billion to finance the National Insurance System deficit during the financial year. During the reporting period, the global economy continued to cope with escalating geopolitical tension and the growing trend of deglobalization and trade protectionism. These factors contributed to a degree of stagnation in many western economies. However, there was some rebound in economic activity towards the latter half of the financial year.

As at June 30, 2024, approximately 70 per cent of NIB's portfolio was invested in Trinidad and Tobago, with the remaining 30 per cent more or less comprising investments held in North America. The two primary sector exposures were financial, 36.39 per cent, and sovereign, 15.28 per cent.

The NIB's overall equity portfolio stood at \$17.06 billion or 63 per

cent of the total fund size at the end of the financial year 2024. This market value represented a decline of \$9.6 million or 0.06 per cent when compared to the prior financial year.

The fund's locally listed equity portfolio underperformed its benchmark, the All T&T Index return of minus 5.16 per cent, by 385 basis points, due to the portfolio's overweight position to specific assets. However, the international equity portfolio continued to be the main driver of the national insurance fund, advancing by approximately 23.97 per cent.

With regard to the fixed income portfolio, it decreased by 18.4 per cent, or \$1.62 billion, to \$7.18 billion, with a weighted average purchased yield to maturity of 5.06 per cent as at June 30, 2024.

The NIB's investment holdings recorded a net unrealized investment loss over the period of \$370 million, driven by unrealized losses in equity investments of \$296 million and loss in fixed income of \$78 million. Conversely, total realized investment income amounted to \$1.26 million, with its primary drivers being dividend income from local equities of \$411 million, gains from the sale of foreign equity holdings in the sum of \$370 million, and interest income from local bonds amounting to \$343 million.

Madam Speaker, it is also noted that the NIB's strategic plan, Vision 2024, expired on June 30, 2024. However, given the resource demand and prioritization of the EMPOWER digital transformation project, NIB took a decision to implement a one-year transitional tactical plan for financial year 2025, in lieu of the development of a new five-year strategic plan. The new five-year planning cycle is expected to resume in 2026.

In the area of digital transformation, during the financial year ended

June 30, 2024, the NIB reported significant progress on the configure and build, as well as the test and validate phases of the EMPOWER project. These phases were accompanied by technical reviews, as well as change management exercises to ensure that all relevant internal stakeholders have sufficient input into the new system and are apprised of the forthcoming changes in operations. The following milestones were achieved during 2024:

- a) The successful completion and testing of the human capital management module within the final quarter of 2024;
- b) The completion of the design and discovery phase for the finance and accounting fusion modules in the second quarter;  
and
- c) The completion of IT EMPOWER pods as part of the Nutanix and network refresh projects which will provide simpler and improved infrastructure, as well as boost the NIB's business continuity capacity. These works are critical to support the insurance operations module which is currently in the configure and build phase.

Finally, in the area of manpower, staff training and welfare, during the financial year, 39 positions were filled, compared to 188 in 2023. As at June 30, 2024, the approved staff complement stood at 755, with a permanent staff headcount of 639. Additionally, the NIB exposed a total of 66 employees to 22 training programmes, with three being held internally and 19 being held externally. I thank you, Madam Speaker.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Madam Speaker:** Member for Princes Town.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Bullying in Schools**

**(Government Measures to Address)**

**Mr. Barry Padarath** (*Princes Town*): Thank you, Madam Speaker.  
Madam Speaker, I beg to move the following Motion standing in my name:

*Whereas* our nation's children continue to experience acts of bullying, as a result of violence, gang infiltration and extortion at schools;

*And whereas* many students have been the victims of bullying, resulting in an ongoing crisis that has been left unattended by the authorities;

*And whereas* the Government has failed to properly implement plans and policies and engage qualified personnel to effectively address bullying in our nation's schools

*Be it resolved* that the House call on the Government to provide adequate support and resources for the protection of our nation's children against bullying in schools throughout Trinidad and Tobago.

**2. 15 p.m.**

Madam Speaker, today I stand as a very proud Member of this Parliament representing the constituency of Princes Town, bringing the very first Private Members Motion in the Fifth Session of 12<sup>th</sup> Parliament. This Private Members Motion being brought here today, is by no coincidence. It was intentional because the Opposition, United National Congress, led by the Leader of the Opposition, the Member for Siparia, the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, sees the value of bringing a Motion that is timely and relevant, particularly, against the backdrop of what is happening in our

nation's schools today.

I want to also thank my colleagues, Madam Speaker, if you look across the Opposition Bench you will notice that several of us, are wearing the colour orange whether it is ties, suits, et cetera, and that too is by no coincidence as the international colours for anti-bullying, school violence, and matters related is the colour orange and the colour blue, in which I see the Member for Oropouche East is splendidly regaled.

Before getting into the substance of the Motion. I recall a conversation that I had with the Leader of the Opposition during the budget debate, and before I spoke in the budget debate, a few weeks ago, the Leader of the Opposition called me and she said "what will you speak on"? And I said "well my shadow portfolio the area of Public Utilities", she said "I want to also remember that you shadow the area of children, and children are under siege in this the country at this point in time". And while water, food, electricity, and national security are important components to the development of Trinidad and Tobago, what are the things that matter to most of us? Whether you sit on the left of the Parliament, or right of the Parliament. What are the things that matter most to all of us? Rhetorically, the Leader of the Opposition she answered her own question in that conversation with me, and she said to me, "it is our children". It is our children.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Mr. B. Padarath:** And that is the reason we have found ourselves here today. Bringing this Motion, knowing that despite we have spent \$70billion in almost 10 years in education, a further \$80 billion in national security, we



are no better off, in terms of addressing and dealing with the issues of the school violence, bullying, and extortion, and education institutions throughout Trinidad and Tobago. Madam Speaker, today we gather not merely as law makers, but as guardians of the future, entrusted with the sacred duty to protect the innocent, the dreams, and the potential of every child in Trinidad and Tobago.

Picture it if you can. A young boy clutching his schoolbag as though it was a shield, walking through a neighbourhood where fear is the dominant language. And we know many of these areas, many of these neighbourhoods, some of our colleagues represent constituencies that have manifested itself—

**Mr. Al-Rawi SC:** “You too.”

**Mr. B. Padarath:** I hear the Member for San Fernando West saying “you too”, but there are some areas that need more attention than others, and sadly it is the areas that are represented by the Government, who have been in office for over 60 years in Trinidad and Tobago’s history.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Mr. B. Padarath:** Madam Speaker, imagine a girl silenced, not by her lack of voice, but by the weight of bullying, and extortion, and the students who experience violence that looms over her. These are not isolated stories, these are cries from classrooms, corridors, and communities that demand our attention and action. It is said that a nation’s greatness is measured by how it treats its most vulnerable. What does it say about us as a people when our children, our nation’s greatest resource are afraid to dream, they are afraid to play, they are afraid to learn, because the very spaces meant to nurture them,

have become battlegrounds.

Madam Speaker, in our recent past, we do not have to look too far, a stone's throw away from here, Rose Hill RC Primary School, where students felt so unsafe with gunmen running up and down their school, and the facility of the school, that they ducked under their desks for cover, and that is why we say that this is place that is supposed to be a safe space for our nation's children, but today it has sadly turned into a battleground.

Today we are called upon to rise beyond politics, beyond division, and embrace the collective responsibility of transforming our schools, and communities into sanctuaries of safety, empowerment, and hope. It is my sincere hope that this debate will be a testament to our shared humanity, a deceleration that no child of Trinidad and Tobago will ever be left in navigate the labyrinth of fear alone. Together, we can craft solutions that echo loudly, not only in this Chamber, but in every heart across our nation, because when we act boldly for our children, we secure not only the future but the legacy of Trinidad and Tobago itself.

Madam Speaker, I started off by saying that this Motion is relevant, it is responsive, it is timely to the environment that we find ourselves in today, particularly in our nation's schools. But, Madam Speaker, I would like to set the tone of the debate, because for me personally, while my style, at times, has been combative across the floor—

**Mrs. Robinson-Regis:** At times?

**Mr. B. Padarath:** At times, the Member for Arouca/Maloney. Today, the tone of this debate should not be a combative tone. It should be one in which we identify what the problems are, what we have done, what we have

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not done, and what we intend to do.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Mr. B. Padarath:** Madam Speaker, it is a day in which we must say we tried, and particularly, for the Government because they are responsible, as the Motion says, for plans, policies, implementation, ensuring that there are resources, there are qualified persons within the school to address the issue of bullying, school violence, and extortion, together with gang infiltration. It is a day to say we tried, it did not work, and now we are looking at those ideas and possible solutions in an attempt to do better.

Madam Speaker, what are the key elements of the Motion? It speaks to bullying; it speaks gang infiltration; it speaks to extortion; it speaks about victims; it speaks about properly implementing plans, policies; it speaks about adequately qualified personnel; it speaks about providing support and resources. But before we go into all of that, we must start with the basics, and the basics regarding this Motion, sets the tone and outlines the problems that we have in addressing these issues, and I will explain to you why.

Madam Speaker, in order to address the problem, you must first identify and admit that there is a problem. If you would allow me to turn to a *Newsday* editorial, dated Monday 13<sup>th</sup> March, 2023, headline:

“Danger of downplaying school indiscipline.”

I repeat:

“Danger of downplaying school indiscipline.”

I said let us start with basics. First we must admit that there is problem. It cannot be that every time that something happens in the national community and national space, affecting schools, affecting the Ministry of Education

and affecting the Ministry of National Security, that our colleagues across the floor in particular, who hold the responsibility and the portfolios of these critical areas, that they downplay the issue of bullying, that they downplay the issue of extortion at schools, that they downplay gang infiltration.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Mr. B. Padarath:** You see, Madam Speaker, the *Newsday* editorial had this to say and I quote:

“At a PNM public meeting in Barataria on Thursday night, Education Minister Dr Nyan Gadsby-Dolly attempted to downplay incidents of school indiscipline and violence.

She noted that out of 891 schools surveyed in February, only 47 schools reported students who were suspended three or more times since the return to in-person teaching in 2022.”

Madam Speaker, this is where it gets more interesting, because the sitting Minister of Education has only been there for the last five years that is between the periods 2020—

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Who was the next one?

**Mr. B. Padarath:**—to where we are and going into the next few months.

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Who was the next person?

**Mr. B. Padarath:** The editorial says:

“...Dr. Gadsby-Dolly isn't the first...”—

**Madam Speaker:** Now, remember I know it is difficult when you are referring. You are adopting this so you have to adjust what you are quoting to comply with what our Standing Orders are, so that you will have to refer to the Member either by portfolio or constituency. Okay?

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**Mr. B. Padarath:** Thank you for that reminder, Madam Speaker. The hon. Member, Minister of Education, it says:

“...isn’t the first education minister to try to downplay incidents of school violence. In 2017...”—

The editorial says

“Anthony Garcia, then the minister of education...”—

Then Member for Arima.

—“...also insisted that videos circulated online were giving an inaccurate picture of indiscipline in schools. The Education Minister’s 2022 statistics were meant to allay concerns about the school system, but the numbers raise more questions.”

Madam Speaker, there are not the words of the Members of the United National Congress, these are not even the words of supporters of the United National Congress. This is the editorial of a national newspaper who has observed during the period, September 2015 to the date of this editorial would have been March 13, 2023, that two successive Ministers of the People’s National Movement Administration have attempted time after time, not one occasion or two occasions.

The editorial listed several occasions when both the Member for St. Ann’s East, Minister of Education, and her former colleague, Anthony Garcia—then Minister of Education, then Member for Arima—buried their heads like the proverbial Ostrich in the sand, refusing to admit and accept what was happening, and what is happening, because the refusal and the denial continues to exist today.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Correct.

**Mr. B. Padarath:** Madam Speaker, that is why I started off by saying in order to effectively address the challenges in our nation's schools, you need the personnel who are charged with the responsibility to implement the plans, the policies to get the qualify persons to address the issues in the schools, to acknowledge the levels of violence, extortion, and gang infiltration in our nation's schools. Refusing to do so, Madam Speaker, is the Minister herself being complicit in advancing where the problems are instead of advancing what the solutions should be.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Form some special unit in [*Inaudible*].

**Mr. B. Padarath:** Madam Chairman, I want to turn your attention to another recital in the Motion and it has to do with the issue of gang infiltration. In the *Trinidad Guardian* the 10<sup>th</sup> October 2024, just last month. There was a headline that says,

“...gangs at Pleasantville Sec.”

“PTA says 9 gangs at Pleasantville Sec; students being robbed and taxed.”

The article went on to say:

“Police are investigating reports that nine gangs are operating within the Pleasantville Secondary School, with two newly formed gangs, the Camo and Guava, causing increased concern at the institution.

‘The Camo students have threatened to beat them up after school. I am very frightened for my son because we live close by and every day he walks home after school...’

‘We want the police to get more involved...’—

A parent said.

“‘My son is already talking about bullying and how nothing happens until someone ends up dead...’”

I will repeat that, Madam Speaker.

“‘We want the police’”—and the Ministry—“‘to get more involved. My son is already talking about bullying and how nothing happens until someone ends up dead...’”

**2.30 p.m.**

Madam Speaker, sadly someone did end up dead, and that young child his name is Jayden Lalchan, and Jayden came from the constituency in which I represent. Madam Speaker, since the incident of Jayden Lalchan there has been a social consciousness that has been awakened in the psyche of Trinidad and Tobago. Since that incident we have been bombarded, as admitted by ACP Mystar of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service, when he said that a floodgate has been opened on the issue of bullying in our nation’s schools. We did not have to look far because we also saw in our nation’s newspapers, following the death of 15 year old Jayden Lalchan, reports and stories had said:

Children at the Siparia East Secondary School they are concerned for their welfare and their safety, bullying reports.

“No witch-hunt in probe into teen’s death after alleged bullying”.

“St. Stephen’s holds peace walk”.

“Becoming bullies”.

Minister of Education: “Don’t engage in same bullying in sensitive

matter”.

“PM on Jayden’s death: No parent should have to bury their child”.

“TTPS to relaunch anti-bullying campaign in South”—schools.

“Bullying, murders and politics”.

“Cops quiz alleged bully, parents”.

“Minister: Stop threatening boy”.

“Bullying in schools and society”.

“Anti-bullying culture needed in schools”.

“Justice for victims”.

Madam Speaker, those were the headlines that followed the death of Jayden Lalchan. But I want to share with you the headlines over the past year:

School police unit to be created to treat with violence.

“Psychologists: Curb school violence through mediation programmes”.

The Member for Siparia “condemns murder, school violence”.

“Inter-Ministerial meeting on school violence next week”.

“School violence, bullying leave scars for life”.

“Government to tackle school violence: Inter-Ministerial team appointed.”

“MOE: Team being set up to address school violence.”

“16 secondary schools identified as ‘high risk’”.

Making education relevant.

Prime Minister “...condemns unacceptable violence in schools.”

“Ministry prepares draft plan to address school violence”.



“TTPS investigating reports of school violence”.

“We need to stop school violence”.

“NGO: Holistic approach needed to treat with school violence”

”No longer left to principals: TTPS to take charge on school violence.

“Ministry of Education meets with TTPS to discuss reducing school violence”.

“Looking for scapegoats in tackling school violence”.

“School violence on dangerous trajectory”.

Teen held for allegedly stomping on classmate, onward to solutions.

“School fights down to almost zero”.

“Education Ministry re-issues guidelines on violence to principals”.

“Deeper dive into school violence needed”.

“Parents blamed for violence in schools”.

“Ministerial committee examining school violence”.

“Police train safety officers to tackle school violence”.

“School violence — merely a symptom”.

“School violence outrage”.

Madam Speaker, I was at pains to identify what some of the reports and headlines were over the past couple months, because it is an issue that is real. It is real in our nation’s school. So despite how much downplaying from the relevant Minister or the Government themselves, it is in the national psyche that this issue is at the forefront in terms of the safety and development of our nation’s children.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Mr. B. Padarath:** Madam Speaker, you will also recall—and it falls

squarely in the recital of the Motion dealing with the issue of gang infiltration—when we were told just a few weeks ago by a *Guardian* article dated the 9<sup>th</sup> of July, 2024:

“8-year-old gangsters: Cops reveal youths involved in extortion rings”.

So while Members would get up and say, well, yes, bullying may be an issue, school violence may be an issue, but they may have a challenge with accepting that there is gang infiltration and extortion in schools, the information is not coming from the Opposition UNC. The information is coming from the TTPS itself, and the problem continues to flourish because of the denial that you continue to live in.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Mr. B. Padarath:** And you ask yourself, persons who are charged with the responsibility of the plans, the policies, the qualified persons, why do they continue to engage in this denial? And you know why, for political expediency, because they believe if the country believes that all is honky dory in our nation’s schools that extortion that you are hearing about in several constituencies and communities have not reached our nation’s schools. Madam Speaker, several Member across the Floor and here will tell you that extortion has been going on in schools for a number of years, if not decades—

**Mr. Indarsingh:** In every community.

**Mr. B. Padarath:** —under the guise of something called “taxing and taxation”.

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Yes.

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**Mr. B. Padarath:** Where children will tax you for your lunch from higher forms, they will tax you for your passage to go home, but know they are mirroring what they are seeing in the national community.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Mr. B. Padarath:** Because you now have gangs preying upon the young, the innocent, the vulnerable in our nation's schools recruiting eight year olds, as the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service has identified to us, and therefore coming back to the notion, that having established, having been at pains to point out to the Minister of Education and the Government that bullying is real, extortion is real, gang infiltration is real—the Minister laughs across the Floor, Madam Speaker—

**Mr. Indarsingh:** That is expected.

**Mr. B. Padarath:**—because to her, refusing to accept that these things are real in our nation's schools, death has not reached her doorstep, fortunately, but death has reached the doorstep of families and parents in the constituency of Princes Town.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Madam Speaker:** So, let us just be careful. You started on a particular note about the debate—

**Hon. Members:** [*Interruption*]

**Madam Speaker:** Members. And, you know, let us just be careful where we are going with that and, you know, calling certain things upon ourselves in here. Okay, please.

**Mr. B. Padarath:** Of course, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, while I wish no one any tragedy I think it requires us to be sensitive.

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**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Mr. B. Padarath:** You know, Madam Speaker, I am reminded because we are on the issue of bullying and how we have qualified persons and personnel helping in our schools. I recalled when I first found out about the death of Jayden Lalchan, and I contacted the Minister of Education, no response. Few hours later I got a text message, “text her”. In light of what had happened there was an urgency to treat with it as the Member of Parliament, as the sitting Member of Parliament, all I got was a response that said, “Oh, how tragic, I will ask for a report”. Subsequent to that I tried meeting, messaging, meeting with the Minister, asking for her to take my call, absolutely no response, and therefore today I am not surprised by the level of callousness and the level of disrespect meted out to us as elected representatives, but also to parents, students and teachers who face a serious issue like this—

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Mr. B. Padarath:**—and look to the Minister as the authority to bring clarity, comfort and change to this matter. Madam Speaker, that leads me to my very next issue, because while we understand what the challenges are with respect to bullying, school violence, extortion, many of these issues have been left un-addressed as indicated in the Motion by those in authority. And this is an opportunity for the Minister to stand up in the House and say to the national community:

1. How many guidance officers and reporting officers are there in the over 800 schools in Trinidad and Tobago?

Madam Speaker, you may be surprised to know that there are many

schools in Trinidad and Tobago that do not have guidance officers and do not have reporting officers in terms of how you administer a reporting mechanism to deal with the issue of bullying, extortion, et cetera.

2. The Minister should say, is there a policy to ensure every school has guidance and reporting officers to address reports of bullying, violence, extortion and gang recruitment?
3. The Minister should say what is the existing policy to ensure reports of violence, bullying, and extortion and gang recruitment and infiltration to the Ministry in a timely manner?
4. The Minister should say, is there a designated unit to treat with complaints from schools, districts with respect to behavioural challenges, gang infiltration and school violence at the Ministry?
5. What specific timelines and guidelines are given to educators and administrators in schools to notify and summon parents and guardians to treat with these matters?
6. We want to hear the Minister tell us, is there an inter-agency council that coordinates reports of abuse, bullying, gang recruitment, extortion with the Children's Authority and the Child Protection Unit?

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Good thinking.

**Mr. B. Padarath:** Madam Speaker:

7. The Minister must tell us what resources are being implemented to integrate a psychometric psychological system in terms of looking for troubled children with respect to their behaviour, but also in terms of administrators and educators in terms of an

education model in the Bachelors in Education, having a component that deals with safety?

Madam Speaker, today cannot be another talk shop, as I have said children have died in this country because downplaying the problem is more important for political expediency. As I mentioned earlier, ACP Myster told us that Jayden Lalchan's death was a wake-up call to our nation. I said that there was a social consciousness that had been awakened. He said that there were floodgates of bullying stories.

Madam Speaker, our country today is not a safe space. People are fearful, and while I have asked about the resources, and I have asked the Minister to address the structure, the symptoms, the mechanism, the resources, the personnel, I want to ask a very specific question as it relates to the Jayden Lalchan matter on the issue of bullying. Because, there was an investigative story that said that the reason why the TTPS could not succeed in continuing their investigation into this matter to determine whether or not there was sufficient evidence of bullying, was that they were refused access to the children, the students and the teachers at the St. Stephen's College by the Ministry.

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Whose instruction? "Oooh". What!

**Mr. B. Padarath:** And I ask the hon. Minister to clarify that, because we were horrified not only as legislators, but as a national community you saw all the vigils, you all saw the expressions of concern and so on, there was some measure or some degree of comfort to the national community that with the existing legislation as it is that there will be an attempt to do something, and then a few weeks later we were told the reason nothing

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happened was that the Ministry refused to give access to the TTPS, and I would like for the Minister to answer that frontally.

**Dr. Moonilal:** What a shame! That is scandalous.

**Mr. B. Padarath:** Madam Speaker, having identified what the problems are, what the response or lack therefore has been from the Government and those in authority as stated in the Motion, what do we do now? Where do we go from here? And I make no apologies for saying this, because I have heard from several quarters that there is existing legislation on the books to treat with bullying and the issue of school violence and matter related to school violence and extortion and gang infiltration in our nation's schools. But, Madam Speaker, what the Opposition is calling for today is proper legislative framework which is needed on specific anti-bullying offences.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Mr. B. Padarath:** And therefore today I want to thank the Leader of the Opposition and my colleagues for their support—

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Yes.

**Mr. B. Padarath:**—and their commitment, because should a UNC government—when a UNC government comes into office, Madam Speaker—

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Mr. B. Padarath:**—should the present Government fail to do this, a UNC government will bring stand-alone legislation to deal with the issue of bullying.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Mr. B. Padarath:** And we intend on naming that legislation, the Jayden

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Lalchan anti-bullying Act of Trinidad and Tobago.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**2.45 p.m.**

And in that legislation, Madam Speaker, it will deal with specific offences which give legislative teeth, which specify ways in which schools will report to the Child Protection Unit. Time after time after time we have come here, we have seen major cuts to the Children's Authority, we have seen major cuts to the Child Protection Unit, and these are the components that are supposed to support the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of National Security in addressing the issue of anti-bullying, gang infiltration in our nation's schools, school violence, Madam Speaker. And therefore if they do not have the requisite support in terms of the resources, then how do you expect them to bring forward the result? And therefore who do we charge for that responsibility and lay that blame for not providing the CPU and the Children's Authority to work in tandem in an inter-agency team, that will give effect to legislation like the Jayden Lalchan anti-bullying Act? Madam Speaker, this requires management, it requires leadership and sadly the evidence indicates that the Members opposite have not provided the management and leadership on these issues.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Mr. B. Padarath:** The legislation should indicate what specific forms of punishment, it must give a clear indication of what is the definition for bullying, what is the definition for school violence, what is the definition for gang infiltration.

Madam Speaker, we must look at ways in which, throughout the



Commonwealth, where we share a common jurisprudence with, what their international benchmarks are. Madam Speaker, in the research I found that Canada, in particular, and Australia, they had the strongest legislation across the Commonwealth because they gave their commitment, they felt it in their hearts but they also felt that it was their responsibility to protect their nations' children against bullying and gang infiltration. In Australia, Madam Speaker, there is something called Brodie's Law. Brodie's Law, Madam Speaker, where you have specific offences, you are not left up to interpretation as what we are being told by lazy, sad to say it, Madam Speaker, by lazy legislators. And who sets the legislative tone? Today we are acting responsibly by bringing this issue to the forefront and saying—

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Mr. B. Padarath:**—that legislation on its own, standalone legislation is needed. Where has been the Minister of Education's voice when I have rattled off for you the plethora of issues that have existed from 2015 to now? You know where the Minister's voice was in a text message that said: "Oh how sad, how tragic, I will ask for a report".

**Dr. Moonilal:** Callous.

**Mr. B. Padarath:** Madam Speaker, I can tell you with certainty that a big part of the issue of addressing bullying, school violence, gang infiltration and extortion has to do with an issue called reprisal. Today I stand as the Member for Princes Town and I can tell you as the Member for Princes Town representing the parents and students who endured the Jayden Lalchan matter, many of them came to me, I do not know them, but they explained what Jayden went through for four and five years in that school. But do you

know why so many of them have not come forward, Madam Speaker. Because in hushed tones in the Constituency of Princes Town there is the issue of reprisal, the issue of reprisal. And it is known even among police officers in the Southern Division as to what I am speaking of. And therefore we live in a society where you have the haves and the have-nots. Those who would call the tune, but who will stand up for those who do not have a voice and that is what the Opposition is doing here today.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Mr. B. Padarath:** We are prepared to stand up and take the critical strong decisions that must say that a child that comes from a particular socio-economic background cannot have an advantage over a child who does not.

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Equality of treatment.

**Mr. B. Padarath:** The law must see us across the board, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker—

**Mr. Indarsingh:** What is the Commissioner Erla doing?

**Mr. B. Padarath:** You know it is often said, drastic times call for drastic action. I have called in this Parliament for parental responsibility legislation since 2017, and again, lazy legislators from the Government, together with public officials who feel it necessary to prop this failing Government, will tell us, well, there are existing laws. But while we call for standalone legislation in terms of a Jayden Lalchan anti-bullying Act, specific offences, punishment, definition, et cetera, we are also calling for a specific Act that deals with parental responsibility legislation. And what will that do? That will not leave it up to the interpretation of anybody to determine parents'

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responsibility for children who have committed acts of crime, Madam Speaker. It will set out a clear pathway in terms of definitions, offences, punishment, but it will also deal with the issue of rehabilitation, because sometimes these children in troubled schools also come from troubled homes and the parents themselves are troubled. And therefore there must be an element of rehabilitation, and that is why the Motion speaks about having qualified personnel in our nation's schools—

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Mr. B. Padarath:**—to give that support not only to children but also to the parents, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, when I raised in this House in 2016 as a new legislator, I came in and I raised the issue of a sex offender's registry, because we were having so many issues, particularly, dealing with sexual offences against children.

**Madam Speaker:** I just want you to be careful in terms of your Motion and I have allowed you some latitude. You talk about implementing plans and policies and support and resources, that is what you called about. So, you are going on to sexual offences, I am trying to give you a little latitude but remember this is bullying in schools, violence, gang infiltration, extortion in school, okay, and the resources, plans, policies, that is what you are talking about. So I have given you a lot of leeway. Please, come back to what you have asked for.

**Mr. B. Padarath:** Madam Speaker, you might be surprised to know that in several other jurisdictions under the definition of bullying, sexual offences is one of those offences that have been identified.

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**Mr. Indarsingh:** Yeah, yeah.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Mr. B. Padarath:** And therefore I think, you know, it is incumbent on all of us, all of us to educate ourselves in terms of how serious this bullying issue is. Because, Madam Speaker, that was just a prime example of you not even knowing that one of the offences under anti-bullying legislation in several jurisdiction deals with sexual offences. And the reason why I raise the issue of sex offender's registry is that I brought it as a solution, a recommendation. The then Attorney General, Member for San Fernando West rejected it outright. Five years later the Member then brought it as a piece of legislation. In 2016 when I said, "make it public", the Member said no, that is foolishness. Do you know five years later the Member brought the legislation, failed to make it public and one year thereafter had to make it public. Therefore, Madam Speaker, it cannot be—

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Mr. B. Padarath:**—it cannot be that we look for political expediency to score one upon each other rather than dealing with what is important and critical to our nation's children, and that is why I say, drastic times call for drastic measures.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Mr. B. Padarath:** The Leader of the Opposition has indicated, in terms of dealing with bullying in schools, extortion, abuse, Madam Speaker, the Leader of the Opposition has already clearly said, if this Government fails to do it, a UNC government will ensure that every school will have—

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Mr. B. Padarath:**—a guidance counsellor, would have a medical doctor and we would also have a psychologist but also attach a police officer to every school in this country.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Mr. B. Padarath:** And that is why I say, drastic times have called for drastic measures. You cannot continue to pussyfoot on the issue, live in denial, children continue to be abused, continue to suffer, continue to be recruited by gang members, you refused to put the qualified personnel and give the resources to the schools to treat with the root problems that are causing the extortion, the gang infiltration and the anti-bullying. Madam Speaker, this is a serious issue as I have indicated before.

I want to take the opportunity, Madam Speaker, to also raise that in several other jurisdictions I had mentioned before with respect to the sexual offences, that while the offences may vary and range from country to country what it has done, it has squarely put, particularly against, across the Commonwealth, Canada, Australia, even India, where there have been serious reports of bullying and so on, Madam Speaker, that what they have done is that there is a structure and a process that is timely, that is efficient, that provides support, that provides rehabilitation.

**Madam Speaker:** You have three minutes left of your full speaking time.

**Mr. B. Padarath:** Thank you. And therefore, Madam Speaker, in wrapping up I will share with you that I started off by saying, to address the problem we must accept that there is a problem. I do not think we could have gotten a greater example of what we saw a little while ago with an intervention of the lack and limited knowledge that several of us have on the issue of

bullying in this country or the issue of bullying worldwide, that it has costed young men, young women, children, their lives because they feel that they have no one to turn to. Today, Madam Speaker, through you, the parents of Jayden Lalchan are looking on at this debate and I want to say to them, while you may be broken and you feel as though you have no one and nowhere to turn to, we ask you to take comfort that you are never alone and you will never walk alone because we will walk with you.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Mr. B. Padarath:** Madam Speaker, having shared with the House a very emotional but also a very clinical approach to dealing with an issue that touches and concerns all of us, today the major question is, what do we do from here?—and it cannot be that there continues be another talk shop, that the debate will end, no major changes will be made, whether it is in our curriculum, whether it is in our laws, whether it is in our behavioral patterns as a society. And therefore, while I commit this Motion to the House I ask the hon. Minister and colleagues opposite to answer those critical questions. Do not personalize the issue. I am not the Minister of Education, I expect the answers from the Minister and that is why I put forward the questions to the Minister and I have spoken about the conduct in terms of your public duty and that dereliction of duty that is evident across the board, not only specific to the Minister of Education, but to the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago.

And therefore while we give our commitment to work across the aisle, Madam Speaker, there is no greater opportunity to work across the aisle with our colleagues than that which will benefit our nation's children.

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**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Mr. B. Padarath:** But first you must have that political will to effect and bring about that change. You must demonstrate that leadership and the management to bring about that change, and we are prepared, Madam Speaker, we are prepared to work with our colleagues. I say to you draft the Bill, the Jayden Lalchan anti-bullying Act, the parental responsibility Act—

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Mr. B. Padarath:**—standalone legislation with specific offences, specific punishment and rehabilitation, the Opposition is prepared to accept it and work with you on it. I want to in my last minute thank the Leader of the Opposition for her support, her guidance, her mothering almost. You know Madam Speaker, when I saw the Leader of the Opposition at the funeral of Jayden Lalchan I said, that is the compassion that Trinidad and Tobago needs to restore—

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Mr. B. Padarath:**—in terms of leadership that will help and assist us in treating with the issues of bullying, gang infiltration and school violence. Madam Speaker, with that I thank you and I beg to move.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Ms. Ameen:** Madam Speaker, I stand to second the Motion and reserve my time to speak.

*Question proposed.*

**Madam Speaker:** The Member for D'Abadie/O'Meara.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**The Minister in the Ministry of Education (Hon. Lisa Morris-Julian):**

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Thank you, Madam Speaker, thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this debate. Madam Speaker, I must admit I had high hopes that this would be a debate of a difference. I had high hopes that this particular debate would not be about personalities or the Opposition or the Government but actually be about the children.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**3.00 p.m.**

But alas, Madam Speaker, I was disappointed yet again. I was disappointed and I felt a bit bullied, Madam Speaker—

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:**—when the word “lazy” was used repeatedly. I think it is not just disrespectful to the Government, Madam Speaker, but also to the Opposition themselves.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** Madam Speakers, being a teacher in 2013, while the Opposition was in Government, I can read you a few headlines about bullying from that time:

“Tim gets tough on school bullying”

“Gopeesingh: Bullies will suffer severe consequences”

“Cabinet to get reports on school bullying today”

**Mr. Manning:** Did nothing.

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:**

“Gopeesingh: PP wants intolerance to school violence”

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:**



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“Gopeesingh: Stop the bullying”

And my personal favourite:

“The Prime Minister said she has asked Gopeesingh for a report on the level of violence and bullying occurring in schools...”—  
nationwide.

Madam Speaker, imagine my shock, because I literally thought bullying started yesterday.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** Madam Speaker, it is very easy to point fingers, it is easy to lay the blame. This is a society that claims it is woke, not just in Trinidad and Tobago, but globally, and bullying, unfortunately, is part of the culture, “lacuray”, “picong”, and we need to fix that.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** When you want to destroy someone, they will drag that person, they will dig up all sorts of things that happened in the past. I remember seeing a quote once that said, “If you continue to judge me on my past, too bad for you because I am not that person any more.”

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** I know all too well about bullying in schools because I was a teacher, as we have established many times before, but I was also a student, but primarily, I am a mother of children who were once bullied or experienced bullying themselves. I was not always a Member of Parliament, I was not always a politician. I always remember when my eldest child had difficulties in school because of her dyslexia, that particular teacher told her that there is only one thing you can do in this life, which is

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to marry a rich man because you cannot get anywhere, and that, Madam Speaker, hurt me to the core and, of course, I went to the school the very next day. That daughter is doing quite well, Madam Speaker, and she is not married yet. She is a university student because she had a mother—

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:**—when she could not fight for herself, her mother fought for her.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** I can tell you the experiences that my children personally went through, but I can also tell you—Madam Speaker, one of the best teachers in Trinidad and Tobago is a man called Carlton Chinapoo, a sociology teacher, and I can close my eyes and remember every single lesson. He would talk of Durkheim, Parsons, and he would tell us that the family is the cornerstone of society, not the schools.

He would say to us that the home is the main socialization agent. The child that you meet is a child that was created at home. It is very easy to blame the Government, it is very easy to blame education system, it is very easy, but we cannot deny that there are parents who have removed themselves from the responsibility of raising their children.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** And if you cannot manage your four, five, six, seven or even one child, how can you expect the teachers to manage 25, 35 or even more? How can you expect a secondary schoolteacher, who will spend an entire day seeing class, upon class, upon class, to fix what you broke at home?

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**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** Every teacher I know has been chief cook and bottle washer, psychologist, caregiver, banker. Many times we have to listen and help because it was not fixed at home.

Madam Speaker, when I heard the Member for Princes Town speak about, I think it was the *Newsday* editorial saying that how the Minister did not take responsibility, we always take responsibility.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** We understand our role, but when we came into office, we had to deal with the pandemic, and when the children came back out, many of these children came from difficult home circumstances. They came angry and hurt, and it took some time to try to get them back to an even keel, and it is not fair for anyone to say that we do not care because you are not with us when we, every single day, have to find solutions.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** Now, Madam Speaker, I can be petty and I could use this opportunity to point out that the Member for Princes Town—how actions and his behaviour has wounded his own colleagues on the other side, but I would not do that.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** I could even say how it affected me and my colleagues, but I would not do not either.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** What I will speak about is that all female Members of Parliament have all suffered from social media groups who attack,

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denigrate—

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:**—and abuse.

Madam Speaker, I remember when the Leader of the House was attacked herself, and bullied, and called—what was it? Accused of having a slave master's name? That was hurtful. That was bullying.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** I can tell you about—

**Mr. Padarath:** Madam Speaker, 48(1). We are dealing with bullying in schools. That Minister has not spoken about anything with respect to what is happening in our nation's schools. It is almost 10 minutes into her contribution.

**Madam Speaker:** So in terms of—Minister, I think you have got some leeway to put some context and now we can zero in on the text of the Motion, which, really, all of those things are related to bullying in schools amongst students.

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** Thank you, Madam Speaker, but the context is children learn from adults.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** There is no society that is perfect and it is not fair to always focus on one segment of society. We have to also know that any race, any gender, any sexual orientation can be bullied, but we, the adults in this House, have to find a way to level the playing field for all.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** So what do we have? What can we do? How can

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we make this better? Are we going to do the blame game or are we actually going to discuss our children? We do not need the blame game. We have the Monday night forum. We do not have to screech and scream at the top of our voices. We have the Senator from the other side who does that on Facebook. What we have here is that our children have been targeted, attacked and treated in a particular way, and we must find a way to deal with it.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** I know there are fathers in this particular House, Madam Speaker, but I cannot believe that there could be any comparison to being a mother and carrying her child for nine months and to lose that child because of cruelty in this often wicked world.

You see, we reject that:

“...the Government has failed to properly implement plans, policies and engage...”—the effective—“...personnel...”—that we need, but we do not disagree.

There is more that we can all do as a society to improve—

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:**—the lot of our children.

Madam Speaker, when the Member said that some areas needed attention more than others, I thought that was a lil ironic. Because I remember when that particular Member was abroad during the pandemic and his area had absolutely no attention but they still voted him in overwhelmingly—

**Mr. Hinds:** Oh, yes. Oh, yes—[*Inaudible*]

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:**—and that, to me—

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**Mr. Padarath:** Madam Speaker, 48(4). I will not take insults about my child from the Member for Laventille West across the Floor.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Mr. Padarath:** Days for sitting down and taking those insults, Madam Speaker, are over.

**Madam Speaker:** Member—

**Mr. Padarath:** Port-of-Spain North/St. Ann's West learnt it the hard way.

**Madam Speaker:** Member, Member.

**Mr. Padarath:** I will call out the Member—[*Inaudible*]

**Madam Speaker:** Member. Member for Princes Town. Member for Princes Town, 48(4). Okay. So I will ask all Members, we are dealing with something that calls for sensitivity on all our parts. I think it is a serious issue, it is a topical issue, it is a societal issue. Let us give it the respect that it deserves and let us respect each other, please. Continue, Member for D'Abadie/O'Meara.

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** Thank you.

**Mr. Hinds:** Madam Speaker, I think it is—if you will permit me?

**Hon. Members:** What Standing Order?

**Hon. Member:** Sit down.

**Mr. Hinds:** The privileges of Parliament.

**Hon. Members:** [*Interruption*]

**Mr. Hinds:** Madam Speaker, the Member for Princes Town called me out as directing an insult—

**Hon. Member:** Standing Order, please.

**Mr. Hinds:**—and I did no such thing.

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**Hon. Member:** Sit down, please. Standing Order.

**Mr. Padarath:** Yes, you did.

**Madam Speaker:** Members. Members, I have asked that we respect the matter that we are dealing with. It is a sensitive matter and let us not be led astray by other things. Let us give the issue of our children and that issue of bullying in schools the sensitivity that it requires. Right? Please, let us proceed.

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** Madam Speaker, when we think of schools, we are supposed to envision places of safety, and very often it is not. We want a place where every child is given the opportunity to dream big, develop their potential and see their school days as some of the best years of their lives. But when we see worldwide what happens in the US, for example, in schools, where often, bullied children hit back in devastating ways, these experiences a child goes through can stay with them for a lifetime.

When bullying enters the picture, it disrupts the process and leaves long-lasting damages. Very often, we see it even in here, Madam Speaker. We see it when hurt people hurt people. As a former teacher myself, I have witnessed first-hand the devastating effects of bullying. I know how it wears down victims emotionally, how it makes them doubt their self-worth. What happened to Jayden is a travesty, but, Madam Speaker, we are all supposed to work together to make sure it does not happen again, and that is why we are supposed to be here today. The saying is, “Sticks and stones may break my bones but words can never hurt me,” this could not be further from the truth. Words have immense power and their impact can linger well into adulthood and as I said earlier, hurt people, hurt people.

Children can be bullied for countless reasons: Skin, colour, religion, race, ethnicity, intelligence, developmental challenges, socio-economic status, the way they speak, their introvertedness, their mental health struggles, or for simply being a good person. You can be bullied for a being good person and no child should face such torments. The rise of social media and technology has only made this issue harder to combat. Cyberbullying is insidious, it is a form of harassment that follows children even in the safety of their homes. I have often seen my children, the children of some of my colleagues, dragged on social media simply because of who their parents are, and that could never be right and should never be that way.

It is no longer in the schoolyards and the classrooms. It is also on their screens. How often did Jayden go home, checked Instagram and saw something that made him cry? That is why it is important, communication with your child. It is so very, very important.

### **3.15p.m.**

We need to send a strong message to those who are bullying but we also need to show the victims that we are there to help. The Ministry of Education's position is clear. We stand against any form of bullying in our schools.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** We continue to have zero tolerance for this type of behaviour. Bullying, intimidation, extortion, taxing, threats, assaults, these are all major offences in the discipline matrix, and these offences can lead to serious consequences like expulsion but before we reach to expulsion,



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Madam Speaker, which to us is the last possible point, we have systems in place to deal with these problems and in order for these systems to work, we need teachers, we need parents and we need the students to all make use of these systems.

We send our students to the Student Support Services Division for help. We have meetings with the parents or guardians. We ask students to make up for their actions. We have suspensions both in school and after school. We have detention. We can even refer the matter to the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services or Children's Authority, involving the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service in serious cases. Madam Speaker, we in this House must make it quite clear, being unkind is never okay.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** Displaying violent behaviour is never acceptable. In addition to this Madam Speaker, school staff and students have the right to have a peaceful learning environment without disturbances. This includes disruptions, communication, or any activities that can distract or harm the orderly conduct of school activities.

Madam Speaker, between 2021 and 2022, and 2022 to 2023, we have expelled 20 students for violent or disruptive behaviour. This is not a celebration. This is actually a failure because we did our very best to make sure it did not reach to this point but with the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service, we can assure and ensure that these children get the help that they need.

Madam Speaker, we have a handful of students who want to disrupt and display violent behaviour and do not want to learn. So we have no

choice but to address it and addressing it cannot just mean taking them out of the school system and dumping them into society ill-educated. We have systems to help them. For example, this school year we transferred 44 students to SERVOL Life Centres where they received special care and support. We also worked with the Military-Led Academic Training Programme to give students the structure and guidance they need to turn their lives around and we are looking into creating a female version of that particular programme to make sure that the young women receive the same support.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** We believe it is not enough Madam Speaker, to just punish bad behaviour. We must address the root causes to stop bullying before it happens. We need to find out what goes on behind closed doors. There was one particular student I had. She was rude, she was surly, she refused to do her work and then I discovered the reason why, Madam Speaker, is because she was practically the woman of the house. Her mother was jailed and the only way this girl could go to school was for this girl to be the wife of the stepfather, and I had no idea what her problem was. Of course, it was reported to the police and Madam Speaker, I took the time to find out the real reason why she was so angry and abrasive and why she bullied so many people in that particular class.

That is what we need, that particular touch, that particular care. We are very serious about tackling this issue. We have hired—I am not sure where the Member for Princes Town got his information, but over 80 social workers, 40 guidance officers, 227 social workers, 282 guidance officers. In

total over 500 officers are assigned to schools that need extra support. Madam Speaker, we have the personnel. We just need people to make use of the tools that we have supplied.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** Bullying is a national problem and we recognize that this may never go away. That is why we have to take an all-government, and all-government includes the Opposition, approach to tackle it. Madam Speaker, we have to remind parents outside of the school setting that there is also support from various Ministries and agencies who support children who are struggling. Recently, the Minister of Social Development and Family Services launched the National Parenting Programme and my colleague from Diego Martin Central—he was there and he spoke at that particular programme and I was very impressed, Madam Speaker, and I think that many people will do well if they do these programmes because children are not toys. They are real, living human beings that need the support from parents who are prepared to actually support them.

We have the parenting workshops in communities that will equip parents and guardians with the necessary resources that will promote child learning and development. Information can be found on the Ministry's website. Madam Speaker, I am giving the information here because somebody here might need it or somebody here might be able to go and tell others about it.

The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services also has established the National Suicide Prevention Hotline, 800-COPE, 800-2673 to offer immediate assistance and support to individuals and families. There

is always someone on the other end willing to listen. Free counselling services are available at the Ministry of Sport and Community Development, Community Mediation Centres, Port of Spain, Tunapuna, Cunupia, Couva, Point Fortin, Penal and Aranguez.

The Ministry of Sport and Community Development also provides parental support for high-conflict families. So, if you know for a fact that your home needs the help, the Ministry of Sport and Community Development will help you. Madam Speaker, my colleague the Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister-Gender and Child Affairs would speak at length about the different types of key stakeholders and collaborations to help address mental health challenges in children and young people but the role that parents have to play cannot be tossed aside. The schools are there but we cannot be the main socialization agent. Parents have to take the responsibility to raise children who are kind, respectful and empathetic.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** Children learn by example. They watch everything their parents do and say, and it is time for parents in here also to reflect on their actions and behaviours because what children see at home shapes how they treat others. Colleagues, it starts with us. When you speak to your children, remind them, a bully is a coward. A bully is weak.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** Teach them not to call other students names, not to make fun of their appearance or discriminate based on race, religion or background. Explain to your children that saying hurtful things even if it seems like a joke is still a form of bullying. Children mimic what they see,

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Madam Speaker. If parents laugh at someone's disability, their weight or how they look, walk or talk, your child will think it is acceptable to do the same.

I want to urge parents that words and behaviours they normalise in their homes can be the foundation for bullying. Madam Speaker, we exist in a society where a well-known bully will receive a space in the Senate, and they will insult everyone and they would be applauded by various persons on social media. Very often fake profiles—Madam Speaker, as I speak here I know there is a certain fake profile in Arima already starting to type up about me already. And that is okay because I have a parent who raised me to know it does not matter what they say about you. What matters is how you feel about yourself.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** And just for the record, I feel I am a good, kind, decent human being.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Mr. Hinds:** PNM

**Hon. Member:** [*Inaudible*]—very decent.

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** But I am not screening so I do not have to say that yet.

**Hon. Members:** [*Laughter*].

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** With social media platforms like TikTok, the culture of picong and name-calling has intensified. A funny video about bullying can go viral in an instant making it even harder for victims to escape its impact. I just want to highlight that not all children are raised in

the same way. I remember reading that the Member for Princes Town, he is an only child so he did not have to fight up like me, Madam Speaker, with six other children, right? So he would have received special privileges, but some children are bullied in their homes by their parents and their siblings and they carry that pain to adulthood. If we do not as adults take a hard look at our own actions, bullying will continue in this particular society.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** Until we the adults stop making excuses for children's bad behaviour, this cycle will persist. Now, Madam Speaker, I saw the young man who was accused of being the aggressor in Jayden's tragic story. People found him, his sister's preschool, his mother's job, his father's work, his aunt, his uncle and I felt that was just too much, Madam Speaker. At the end of the day, we have to save every single child. We must also remember that the first seven years—

**Madam Speaker:** Hon. Member, you have two more minutes of your ordinary speaking time left. You are entitled to 15 more minutes to wind up your contribution.

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** Thank you.

**Madam Speaker:** Yes you may proceed.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** Thank you, Madam Speaker. The first seven years of a child's life are critical. This is when they see, and absorb everything they hear. By the time they enter primary school and secondary school, their behaviour is reflected from the environment that they grew up in. Madam Speaker, when schools call in parents to discuss their child's behaviour,

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many parents go on the defensive. Instead of working with the school to understand what is going wrong, they end up making excuses for their child. This does not help anyone. Parents need to teach their children accountability and we here in this House also need to learn to be accountable for our actions.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** Actions have consequences and in the same way the Opposition will scream that voting also has consequences, I want to say the consequence is good governance on this side.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** How can we expect our children to learn to handle emotions and social situations in a healthy way if we in this House are screaming and screeching and insulting in a particular way?

**Hon Member:** Dog whistling

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** Now, I also think Madam Speaker, it is very wrong for persons to always lay everything on how we act in Parliament when they themselves do not know how to act at home. I also think it is wrong when the media highlights only the negative because I can look and see everything about bullying but I would never see Arouca/Maloney's ECCE School winning a prize for the best garden in the East-West Corridor.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** I would not see Arima Boys RC winning the football in primary school tournaments in Arima.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

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**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** I would not see how Hillview College made its way from a cricket school to an actual football school in the span of only one year.

**Hon. Members:** [*Laughter*]

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** I am quite proud of that.

**3.30 p.m.**

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** [*Laughter*] But I would see everything negative that could be possibly said.

Madam Speaker, I just want to go back to communication. Go beyond asking simple closed questions: How was school today? Instead ask: Who did you spend time with today? Did you make any new friends? Is anyone being unkind to you in school? By having these deeper conversations, parents can understand what their children are actually experiencing and address issues before they escalate. It took me a very long time to learn how to communicate with my children, but I learnt because I realize that in this particular world, your children must always be able to speak to you, because there are enough predators out there and if you do not talk to your child, that predator will.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** Madam Speaker, the verbal bullying which also includes gossiping; telling tales; body shaming; putting others down; physical bullying; hitting; shoving; social bullying, excluding someone from activities and encouraging others to leave them out. Like today, Madam Speaker, I noticed that everyone on the other side, except the Member for Cumuto/Manzanilla, had on orange and I felt very sad. I felt like if it was a



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form of social bullying.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** And I would like to let the Member know that I will always let him know what I am going to wear in Parliament, so we could match.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** When children witness bullying, we have to teach them to speak up. That is also an important factor. Make sure that children peer regulate, to let them know that when they see something that is wrong that they can speak up for their friend also. Teaching them that standing up for others is not being a snitch, it is simply doing the right thing.

Madam Speaker, as I conclude, I want to make it abundantly clear. We, in the Ministry of Education, have a firm unwavering position on bullying. We have a zero tolerance policy and we will continue to take all the necessary steps. I want to give you the assurance that we will continue to work along teachers, schools, parents, associations. Recently, the cadets stated that they would like to go into primary schools and assist with this bullying situation and my colleague and I are quite happy to invite them to partner with us. We have steelbands who also want to assist with that particular situation, because music can definitely help heal a fractured school.

Madam Speaker, we all want a society where children can go without harassment or discrimination. We all want our children to feel safe. And we in the Ministry of Education, we understand that our work does not end at the school gates. But we need the parents to also work with us.

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Hon. L. Morris-Julian (cont'd)

2024.11.22

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** This is not just about my children or your children, it is about our children. And if you are unable or unwilling to take responsibility in addressing your child's behaviour then you are setting them up for failure and if our colleagues on the other side want to make this about PNM and UNC, then that is also setting up our children for failure. We can work together. As adults knowing that bullying is something that affects us also, we can speak to the persons that purport to speak on our behalf.

There is a fake Facebook group called "PNM Youth", and we sent out our press release saying that we are not associated with that group. I have never seen anyone on the other side disassociate themselves from "KICK OUT the PNM" yet and they say nothing but horrible, horrible, untruthful things. So how could you as an adult want to speak to a child about bullying when your organization is encouraging it?

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** We here on this side, we have a tendency to speak the truth, so we may say things on the platform, but know what we are saying is the truth.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** I remember the Member for Tabaquite said stop contradicting yourself, people are watching. I would like to tell our colleagues everyone is watching and we on this side are more than willing to do what is right because that is what we are accustomed doing and we will gladly show you the way to do it. I thank you very much.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

Bullying in Schools (Government  
Measures to Address)  
Dr. Bodoë (cont'd)

2024.11.22

**Madam Speaker:** Member for Fyzabad.

**Dr. Lackram Bodoë (Fyzabad):** Thank you, Madam Speaker, for the opportunity to contribute, to join this debate on what I believe is a very timely and a very critical issue. First of all, I would want to say that I would want to believe that this evening, the Parliament's time will be well spent on debating an issue that is pervasive in our education system. I too would like to commend the Leader of the Opposition for choosing this particular Motion, Madam Speaker, this particular topic for debate on Private Member's Day and I want to congratulate the Member of Parliament for Princes Town on piloting this very, very important Motion.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Dr. L. Bodoë:** Madam Speaker, my intention this evening is to highlight a little bit, speak a little bit about the mental health effects of bullying. But before I go there, I just want to address a few of the points made by the previous speaker, the Member, my colleague from D'Abadie/O'Meara and just to start off with saying that we on this side will always support work that will benefit the children of the nation. This is not really about PNM, UNC, Madam Speaker. And whilst I agree that to a large extent there is an important role for parents to play in finding the solutions to this critical issue of bullying in schools, I think I got the impression that parents were being blamed and I truly hope that that is not the impression that was being created by the previous speaker. Because although parents have an important role to play, we simply cannot say, you know, blame the parents.

The previous Member also brought the issue of cyber bullying which is a form of bullying. It is a very important issue in terms of component of

bullying, cyber bullying but I just want to ask what the status of legislation is. I believe that that would have come to a Joint Select Committee in 2019. So I ask that question. And I am also reliably informed that the cyber bullying unit is not properly resourced but you know, hopefully the Government will be able to answer those questions.

The previous speaker also mentioned the fact that there were 50 officers assigned to schools and of course we are told that there are some 800 schools in the nation. Really and truly, the question has to be asked and this Motion speaks to the issue of resources, and really and truly one has to ask whether these are adequate resources in terms of the access of the children to these guidance officers. I just want to again ask the question that my colleague, the MP for Princes Town, asked in terms of who or what would have stopped the investigation into the unfortunate death of Jayden Lalchan.

So, Madam Speaker, I will move on into my contribution and just again to note that bullying is a complex problem that requires a multitude of approaches.

Madam Speaker, Jayden Lalchan met an unfortunate end in terms of dying but I just want to say that there are many Jayden Lanchans out there who would have suffered, you know, from bullying and whilst they would not have had the ultimate outcome but would have had mental and physical scars. It is a common problem. It is often underreported and really and truly the question is: What is the true incidence in our schools? I am not sure that we have those figures locally, Madam Speaker, whether any study has been done. Perhaps the Minister of Education, in her contribution, might be able

to shed some light on this because as you rightly stated, we have to define a problem before we can offer the solutions.

I, myself, was a former teacher as well, way back in 1978 when I taught at Fyzabad Secondary School for one year. A school that now falls in my constituency and I can say, Madam Speaker, that even in those days, it sounds like it is a long time ago, maybe 40 years ago, there was the issue of students walking around with penknives in their pockets and so on. So this whole issue of bullying and school violence has been one that has been there for a long time and really and truly societies across the world are struggling to deal with this issue.

In terms of the prevalence, I looked at one Canadian study in my research, which reported that 12 per cent of females and 18 per cent of males—this is a particular survey that was done. And these were numbers that reported being bullied at least twice a month and to put this in perspective, in a classroom of 35 children, between four to six, children are being bullied or will be doing the bullying on a regular basis.

You know, Madam Speaker, my daughter is a psychologist at the doctorate level and you know just whenever I am in the Parliament, I let her know I am in the Parliament and she asked what we are speaking about and I said today we are discussing bullying and unsolicited, she said it is an important point. And she also indicated to the fact something that I was not aware of until today, that she was also a victim of bullying when she was a student at high school in San Fernando. It took the form of verbal bullying in terms of reference to your parent and father and whatnot and so on. So obviously you know it is pervasive. All of us here in this House know

someone who would have been a victim of this in one form or the other.

So, Madam Speaker, the further details from this particular Canadian study that I am referring to, it debunks a number of myths circulating that lead people to believe that it is a normal part of childhood. There is a common belief that listen, bullying, you know, it is a common part of growing up and so on but this is really not the case. It is not so and it should not be so. So what are some of the facts, Madam Speaker? Let us look at this. Well we know, of course, for a fact that bullying causes serious harm and I just wanted to put this on the record, Madam Speaker. It is well known but I think it is important as we look to finding some of the solutions to look at what we can look out for. So we know children who are bullied suffer more headaches, more stomach aches. They suffer from depression and anxiety. So there are many mental health issues and problems associated with bullying that tend to last until later in life. It is also known that:

“Children who bully and those who are bullied, are at greater risk of suicide.”

Of course they are:

“...more likely to miss school”—to—“show little interest in their studies and”—to—“suffer poor grades.”

And:

“Children who bully are more likely to using drugs and alcohol and engage in criminal activity.”

So this is a fact.

Now, Madam Speaker, it is also a fact that:

“...Children do not grow out of bullying”

It is important first to remember—and again this will extend to the problems that we are facing in the society with violence and so on. Without intervention—and this is where it is important and this is where the Member brought the Motion because we have to intervene when the time is appropriate. So:

“Without intervention, a significant number of youth who bully in childhood will continue to bully as they move through adolescence and into adulthood.”

**3.45 p.m.**

So, I think this was a very important, you know, finding from this study, Madam Speaker. It goes on to say that:

“The destructive lessons learned in childhood about the negative use of power...”—and bullying are really something.

It is about power, it is an imbalance of power. So these lessons are about the negative use of power:

“...may translate into sexual harassment in the workplace, dating violence, marital abuse, child abuse, and elder abuse”

So, Madam Speaker, these issues that are happening in the school have long-term effects in terms of what is happening and what can happen later on. So, I am just making the case, you know, that intervention at this level is very, very, very critical, Madam Speaker.

What is another fact that came out of this study? And the other fact that came out of this study is that:

“Reporting bullying is an effective way to stop the violence.”

And, this is an issue here because we are saying that we really and truly do not know the real incidents of bullying, and there is an issue with reporting.  
And:

“Bullying is a relationship problem. It is about power and the abuse of power, and it is incredibly difficult for children who”—have been—“victimized to remove themselves from this destructive relationship.”

This is where teachers and parents, you know, and the guidance counsellors, and everybody has a role to play.

“Once a bullying relationship is established, attempts to make the bullying stop on their own are usually unsuccessful and may make the bullying worse.”

So:

“Adult intervention is required to correct the power imbalance.”

This adult intervention, Madam Speaker, will come in many forms: Parents, of course, with the school guidance counsellors, teachers, you know, guardians, and so on. So, this is an important point for us to remember, Madam Speaker. Now what is another fact that is known about bullying?

“Bullying happens wherever children gather to live, learn, or play.”

I think it is recognized but, you know—so it could happen in the classroom. It could happen, you know, in taxis, in the maxi, and in the playground. I have some figures here from a website called *stopbullying.gov*. These are the so-called hot spots to look out for:

- “Hallway or stairwell...”—of the schools— “...(43.4 %)...”—  
of the incidents occur.



- “Cafeteria (26.8 %)
- Outside on the school grounds (21.9 %)
- Online or text (15 %)
- Bathroom or the locker room (12.1 %)...”—I suspect the numbers are even higher. And:
- “...Somewhere else in the school building (2.1 %)

So, I think that it is important that we recognize where it takes place because the interventions—the measures we take, you know, will be important. And, of course, it was also mentioned by my colleague from Princes Town that bullying can occur within the family and the family home.

Now another important fact, Madam Speaker, is the role that peers can play. So, we know that:

“...Peers play a major role in bullying - by either escalating or stopping it...”

I found this interesting. Again, this study tells us, and if you would permit me, Madam Speaker, the study found that:

“In about 85-88 % of bullying incidents observed on the school playground...”

And I make this point, Madam Speaker, because frequently, there are videos circulating of school violence and so on, and quite often, we will see peers around, and some will be cheering on, you know, and others will try to intervene. So what was the finding?

“In about 85-88 % of bullying incidents observed on the...playground, peers were present and were watching the bullying happen...”

This is a reality in our schools in Trinidad and Tobago as well.

“Peers spent 54 % of the time watching the child who was bullying, 21 % of the time joining in, and only 25 % of the time watching the victimized child.”

So, obviously, there is some influence by those who are around looking at the bullying. So, we know that:

“Children are drawn to bullying episodes, even though the majority of children say they don’t like to see another child being hurt.”

This is a matter that we need to address, Madam Speaker. And, of course:

“Children who are bystanders learn about the negative use of power and aggression in relationships.”

And therefore:

“Over time, bullying behaviour becomes “normalized.”

I think this is a very important issue. Again, it means that we need to intervene in terms of change of behaviour and so on. The study goes on to say that:

“...When peers had the confidence and courage to intervene, the bullying ended within 10 seconds in the majority of playground episodes.”

So, I thought that was an important finding to share in this debate, Madam Speaker.

I just want to move on to the long-term effects of bullying. I would want to refer, here now, to some findings from an author by the name of Erin L. George. This is from the website called the *MentalHealth.com*. And this

author goes on to speak about the effects of bullying, and we have, of course, several effects:

“Emotional effects:

Increased anxiety and stress...

Depression...

Low self-esteem”

I will come back to speak a little bit about that.

“ Fear and isolation...

Sleep disturbances...”

Sometimes the child may not be able to sleep at home, and this is important for the parent to recognize whilst it is happening. And, you have what is called the somatic complaints. In medicine, there is a term for it where you do not have—because of psychological distress, you can manifest what they call somatic or physical complaints, and this is where you have the stomachaches, and headaches, and so on. Sometimes you cannot find any medical reason for this. Again, as medical practitioners, we are aware of this and we know we have to go into the social background and the school background. Interestingly, of course, you can have physical injuries, like, you know, bruises, and cuts, and so on, and this is important whenever a child presents at an emergency department or a doctor to try and find out exactly how this injury may have occurred.

So, in terms of the effects of the bullying, Madam Speaker, there are three issues: So you have the mental health issues, and they are:

“...linked to a variety of the mental health issues, including depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).”

So, you know, we speak about post-traumatic stress disorder in war veterans and so on, but this really is a real situation here in terms of the victims of bullying. They:

“...often suffer from feelings of helplessness and hopelessness...”

—and, of course, they require professional help to overcome—

This is where we have to make a call for sufficient counsellors in schools, Madam Speaker. And, of course, the Leader of the Opposition mentioned that, you know, it is the intention of us, on this side, when we form the next Government to ensure that there is medical access to students in schools, Madam Speaker.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Dr. L. Bodoë:** And this, of course, will include easy access to counselling and to psychological and professional help. There is also the issue of low self-esteem. So, when someone is constantly put down and belittled, it is hard for them to feel good about themselves, and this can lead into a cycle of low self-esteem, Madam Speaker. And, of course, this can be particularly damaging to young adults, teens, and school-age children who are in the developmental stages where they are forming their identity, and this issue of identity formation is very, very important, and, of course, this is where it could lead to the suicidal ideation and even suicides as we saw in that unfortunate case. As I mentioned before, victims of bullying may end up becoming bullies themselves, Madam Speaker, and this can perpetuate the cycle of bullying. So those are some of the emotional effects, Madam Speaker.

So, Madam Speaker, in terms of the long-term effects of bullying, there are two bad outcomes that we need to be familiar with. The first outcome is that you become more likely, as a victim of bullying, you will become more susceptible to depression, anger, or bitterness. And we have a lot of young people out there who are angry, bitter, and depressed. Therefore, we have to wonder whether some of these young people are experiencing bullying in schools, or in, you know, at home, and so on. I came across in my research, Madam Speaker, something that is very important, you know, in terms of your identity and confidence. So, there is something called “other confidence,” Madam Speaker. It is the first time I have heard of it, but I understand what it is.

**Hon. Member:** Other confidence?

**Dr. L. Bodoie:** Other confidence. So it is other and confidence. What is other confidence?

It says that many people’s self-confidence is continually shored up by those around them telling them, both in covert and subtle ways, that they are good worthy people.

So, of course, when they are experiencing bullying, the opposite happens. Their self-confidence is shattered sometimes. And, you know, other confidence is the reason why, you know, people like to belong to groups. One form of bullying that happens in schools sometimes is that, you know, you can be excluded from groups, and this also is a more subtle form of bullying. But the second bad outcome, Madam Speaker, unfolds more slowly over time. What can happen over a period of time is that you could have deficits in academic performance.

Madam Speaker, if you were bullied at school, it is very likely that you will want to miss school. Sometimes it is so bad that you will want to leave school, and, therefore, if you leave school, it means that you have put your academic achievements—you have not been able to realize your true academic potential. Therefore, you know, you can lose out on opportunities for advancement, for further study, and ultimately employment. So, the long-term effect of bullying is that you may not be able to realize your true potential as a human being in the workplace and even in your contribution to society. So, I think, Madam Speaker, it is very, very important. What also happens is that the bullied kids internalize negative attitudes and concerning aspects of themselves that set them apart from others, and of course, this is another issue, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, I just wanted to speak a little bit about something called “perception of control.” I found this very interesting as well. The research for this contribution also reveals a few things that, you know, even to me as an experienced practitioner, I did not know and was not aware of before. So a 2004 study of college students in Spain found that there was a direct relationship between the victim’s perception of control over their bullying experience and the extent of long-term difficulties that they experienced as a result of bullying. So, we are talking here, Members, about a perception.

So, what did they find? They found that bullied students who believed they were able to influence and/or escape their bullies reported fewer negative long-term effects from having been bullied than did students who felt helpless to influence a situation while it was happening. So, this

was interesting. They found that perception of control—if you thought that listen— In other words, if you felt that listen, you are not going to let this affect you, then perception of control, and not reality of control, was key in this study as no relationship was found between the way students cope with being bullied and how they turned out.

So, I think that is an important lesson for us in terms of when we counsel the victims of bullying and so on. It is how you perceive this thing, you know, would determine how you come out of it. So, in truth, and in fact, what it showed is it did not matter what the students did. It only mattered what they believed. I think that was an important psychological finding, Madam Speaker.

I just wanted to share with the House a classic phrase from the poet George Herbert, who said, “Living well is the best revenge.” And my colleague who spoke earliest, spoke about, you know, cyberbullying and so on, and really and truly, it is how you treat with it. Now, Madam Speaker, another interesting fact I want to share with the House in terms of the effects of bullying. This relates to the age at which you are exposed to bullying. I also found this to be very interesting. The finding from the research, Madam Speaker, is that:

“Young children who are first bullied during their preteen years appeared to be less negatively impacted in the long term than are children who were first bullied as teens...”

**Mr. Deyalsingh:** [*Inaudible*]

**Dr. L. Bodoie:** Yes, Member for St Joseph, I found this very interesting. So if you were bullied in your preteen years, you are less likely to be affected.

It is not saying you will not be affected, of course you will be affected. But if you were bullied first, I am talking about your first incident, your first experience of bullying as a teen, it is worse.

**4.00 p.m.**

Also, an interesting finding here, Madam Speaker, is that it was found:

“...in the first-bullied-as-teen group...”

—so they talk about the group where you were first bullied as a teen in this study.

“...an interesting but hard-to-make-sense of sex difference, where”—they found that in this situation, the—“women tend to become more aggressive as a result of their bullying experience, and men demonstrated a greater tendency to use substance.”

So, apparently, there would have been a different response from the teenage girls, in terms of becoming more aggressive, and one could probably explain that is, you know, a reaction, whereas the men were more likely to demonstrate abusive tendencies to substances, Madam Speaker.

And, of course, the issue of social support is very, very important because as we know, the protective effect of a good social support network, you know, on the survivor’s long term would come and so on. And I am sure a lot more needs to be said here about the social support and the lack of social support in our schools, some will say, in the society, in terms of treating with this issue.

So, Madam Speaker, I just wanted to move on quickly to the issue of cyberbullying which was mentioned, and just to add a few more points



because I found a very interesting study here from the NIH, the National Institute of Health, from the US regarding depression much higher among youth victims of school cyberbullying. And this is an old study, about 14 years old, but I am sure it is still relevant to what we are experiencing now. And, of course, they found, by research, that:

“...youth who are the targets of cyber bullying at school are at a greater risk for depression than are the youths who bully them...”

So this:

“...new finding”—new as it was then, was—“...in contrast to earlier studies of traditional bullying, which found that the highest depression scores were reported by...the bully victims.”

So it seems that the cyberbullying, you know, has a significant impact, and the reason for this partly is because:

“...cyber victims may not see or identify their harasser...”

So the:

“...cyber victims may be more likely to feel isolated, dehumanized or helpless at the time of the attack.”

So, basically, what it is saying is that if you have someone attacking you, who you can see, it is easier to treat and cope with that, than if you have these attacks coming, you know, in cyberspace where, you know, it is difficult. And this can be a real form of harassment.

So, Madam Speaker, I have spoken a bit about what, you know, some of the findings of the research are. Now, what about some solutions, in terms of, you know, trying to reduce the bullying in schools? And there are some tips, again, here that might be useful, in terms of the discussion and the

planning, you know, going forward. So what should we do to try to reduce the incidents of bullying?

So, first of all, we must have clear definitions, Madam Speaker—and I am speaking here on a report from an institution called the Crisis Prevention Institute based in Wisconsin, USA, and they are saying that we need to have:

“...Clear Definitions”.

So this:

“CPI”—Crisis Prevention Institute—“defines bullying as intentionally aggressive behaviour that involves a real or perceived imbalance of power.”

And they go on to classify bullying into:

“...physical, verbal, nonverbal or relational.”

**Madam Speaker:** Hon. Member, you have two more minutes left of ordinary time. You are entitled to 15 more minutes to wind up your contribution, if you wish.

**Dr. L. Bodoë:** Thank you, Madam Speaker.

**Madam Speaker:** Sure.

**Dr. L. Bodoë:** I will take a few more minutes.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Dr. L. Bodoë:** So, again, we were saying here that we have to identify the problem first we must have a clear definition, Madam Speaker. So we know it:

“...can take the form of:

- Threats
- Teasing

- Name calling
- Pushing
- Hitting
- Cyberbullying”—and so on.

So we need to know exactly, you know, what different forms it can take,  
Madam Speaker.

It is also important—the next step is really to:

“Reduce Bullying by Removing Labels and Addressing Behavior”.

So this was important in terms of how we counsel and so on.

“Teachers and staff can unintentionally place judgment on a student  
when they use labels like ‘bully’ or ‘victim’.”

So this is interesting research, interesting findings. We have to be careful in  
terms of the terms we use, in terms of addressing the behaviour. So that  
would be one step as well, Madam Speaker.

Now, we also need to try and set, you know, very:

“...Clear, Enforceable Rules and Expectations”.

The Member for D’Abadie/O’Meara spoke about zero tolerance. I think that  
is very important. And, you know, some of the guidelines here was that, you  
know, you:

“• State the rules in positive terms.”

And you try and:

“• Set rules that will cover multiple situations.”

And, of course, you have to:

“• Make sure the rules are age appropriate.”

And you have to:

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“• Teach the students the rules.”

And, of course, you have to:

“• Be consistent in enforcing the rules.”

Madam Speaker, and a very critical aspect of trying to treat with this, of course, is to try and look:

“...for Warning Signs”.

So we must all be aware of the warning signs, and this is where parental education is important. So if you have a child who has:

“•...unexplainable injuries

• Frequently have headaches or stomachaches

• Experiences changes in eating habits

•...difficulty sleeping”

You are:

“• Seeing declining grades”

Losing—“•...interest in school and friends”

—it gives us a signal, Madam Speaker.

So, Madam Speaker, as I close my contribution, I just want to say that, you know, there are 15 schools in Fyzabad that I have under my watch: 11 primary schools, four secondary schools. The issue is there, it rears its head in the public domain from time to time, and so, of course, this is very important. I want to, again, ask for more access for school guidance counsellors, for psychologists in the schools, and I want to support the call of my colleague for the anti-bullying legislation. The Member of Parliament for Princes Town raised that issue.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

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**Dr. L. Bodoë:** And I also, of course, want to support his call for parental responsibility laws, Madam Speaker. I want to make it clear that although we cannot blame the parents entirely, as the other side wants to do, you know, we on this side also recognize the importance of the parents taking a critical role, you know, in dealing with this issue, Madam Speaker. So I look forward to the issues and ideas that will be put forward here in this debate, Madam Speaker. Again, I want to thank my colleague for bringing to the forefront, on Private Members' Day, a very, very important and critical issue in the nation. And I trust and hope that at the end of today's debate that we will have some solutions going forward. Madam Speaker, I thank you.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Madam Speaker:** Minister of Education.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**The Minister of Education (Hon. Dr. Nyan Gadsby-Dolly):** Thank you, Madam Speaker. It is a pleasure and a privilege to stand at this juncture to contribute to a Motion that, regardless of why it was brought, is a very important Motion for Trinidad and Tobago. Bullying has been a part of our education landscape for maybe as long as there have been schools. The Member for Fyzabad has given us a clinical discourse—and I want to thank him for his contribution—regarding the effects of bullying, and why it is so important for us to face this issue. In 2023, the World Health Organization declared bullying in childhood a global public health problem. So I want us to understand contextually that bullying is a problem, not just in Trinidad and Tobago, it is a global issue that, all over the world, educators as well as

policymakers have been grappling with because we have established, based on the contributions thus far, bullying does not only take place in schools. As a matter of fact, bullying can be, in many cases, a learned behaviour, and even today, in bringing the Motion, we would have seen the mover of the Motion react in a usual bullying type of way, because the Member for Princes Town is known for his combative or bullying style.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly:** And so it is learned behaviour that our children are exposed to. In many cases, one in three students experience bullying. It affects upwards of 130 million children around the world. This is not something that can be easily eradicated. If it were so, it would have been done already. I attended a UNESCO conference in November and that conference was for Latin America and the Caribbean, and the topic of the conference was school violence, including bullying. Educators from around the region came together to discuss this and everyone is grappling with this issue.

As far back as 1988, in Trinidad and Tobago, the then Minister of Education, who was Clive Pantin, convened a conference which was to discuss the crisis—this is 36 years ago—of school violence and bullying; 36 years ago in Trinidad and Tobago that was considered at crisis level. And therefore, looking at the Motion speaking about the crisis that exists, it has not now started to be an issue in Trinidad and Tobago, it was a crisis many years ago. And if we consider what our society was at that time, then how much more urgent is it now that we are discussing this most important issue?

To deal with the behaviour of students and to help with students who

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have special needs, which includes students who are faced with serious societal challenges in their homes—sometimes we think of students with special needs only as those with learning disabilities. But, Madam Speaker, I want to postulate here to you that students who come from traumatic backgrounds are also students with special needs, and that is the reason that the Student Support Services was introduced in the education sector 20 years ago. So when we are speaking about this situation that exists now, it is not something that has just come up overnight, it is something we have recognized in our society for many years. And as a country, we have taken steps to deal with these issues as we have been going along.

So it is really disingenuous and unnecessary for us, for political expediency—let me use the words of the mover—to pretend as though we have just come about this problem. We have been grappling with it, the region is grappling with it, the world is grappling with it, and let us not undersell ourselves in Trinidad and Tobago, in terms of what we have been doing for many years. When we sit in these international conferences, many times—I am sure many of the other Ministers can attest that when we speak about what we are doing in Trinidad and Tobago, others are very complimentary and they take pattern from what we have been doing. So let us not undersell ourselves. Yes, there are things we can do better but to stand and try to create a picture of Trinidad and Tobago as going to hell in a handbasket, it is a horrible thing that is done in the name of political expediency. We need to stop it.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly:** We need to stop selling ourselves negative

news about ourselves. And then when we see our children being negative, we wonder why? Because we are selling negativity all over rather than acknowledging the things that we have to do better in, but also saying to our country, “We have come a way in dealing with problems, especially complex problems like school bullying.”

Madam Speaker, far from putting our heads in the sand, the Ministry of Education has been at the forefront of acknowledging that we have an issue that continues over many years and looking at the ways at dealing with it. In fact, the Member for Princes Town, the mover, stood and mentioned many of the headlines that spoke to the initiatives that were being put in place even while saying nothing was being done. And that, again, is a form of social bullying, standing and saying things that are just not true because you want political expediency.

#### **4.30 p.m.**

So, if a teacher is absent for some reason, we have assigned learning support assistance to the schools, two to three per school, so that they can assist in the operations of the school. Data is what informed that, not hiding head in the sand. Data, and hard quiet work, to ensure that we give our children who need it—those who are being bullied, many times are the ones who are hurting, hurt children hurt. So, it is not just about the punishment, it is about understanding, and we understand because we have done the work to understand, because we have gotten the data to understand, and we have implemented the solutions based on the data we have collected.

Another aspect of the transformation, bullies are hurt children, many times dealing with anger. If you see some of the issues that these children



face, many of them, are children of parents who have died violent deaths, fathers—and they seem almost unable, some of them, to restrain themselves, no matter how much they may want to. Transformation, that is what we have to do, and so we have introduced as well, remedial education to deal with their performance. We have introduced cultural transformation through education policy, and this is rooted in Vision 2030, where it is recognized that our development, as a nation, is not where it should be. Because we have negative values, attitudes, and behaviours that in spite of our education system, and how qualified many of our nationals are, those values, attitudes, and behaviours are keeping us back. They are making us not as productive as we should be, and so, at our education system, understanding that many of the children who are bullied, our children who are hurt, and not engaged, we have looked at, across the board what is offered in our schools.

There are many schools that do not have strong discipline problems, and in those schools, what do you see? The children are involved in multiple activities. There are academic, there is vocational, there is sporting, multiple activities, and the children are so engaged in their school lives that there is less time for misbehaviour. But what is one of the crosscutting themes in the schools where you have a lot of indiscipline? You have less of that, less of the activities that are required to engage our children. Sometimes a child may just be coming to school for choir or pan, as a lifeline, as an escape from what is going on in their home, in their community, and if a school does not offer these things, then these children are lost.

So, we said to our principals that we have to transform the culture, our children must not be choosing violence. They have to have options, and

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therefore, something like a sports day, you must have it. Something like a career day, you must have it. You must engage your children in a performance activity. Christmas concerts, you know, sometimes schools do away with it, but there is so much our children got from it, and when it is done away with then there are children who suffer, and some of these children turn out to be bullies because they are not engaged. We said to our schools that there are a slew of mandatory activities that you must do, so that our children have options. So that, instead of bullying, they can find themselves involved in something where they can learn to work on a team. Where are they going to learn that? Where are they going to learn to interact with different types of people? How are our teachers going to get into a space with our students, where they can speak to them about non-academic things?

Because make no mistake, a lot of the children that we see now, a lot of us as adults, we can remember the direct influence of our teachers, and we can remember them speaking to us about things that were not academic, that were about life. But, because we were connected to them in a certain way, it resonated. That up to today, it influences our lives. Teachers can get into those spaces with students, when they interact with them outside of the classroom. In a kitchen garden, everybody's hand in the dirt, and a teacher could give valuable lessons not just about science, but also about life because what is affecting us with that bullying, is the ability of our students to live, and to perform in the world that they live in, and to handle situations.

So, when we say that our students are a part of cultural transformation, they must take part in different activities, it is about how

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they learn values, attitudes, and behaviours. And positive values, attitudes, and behaviours inculcated into our students would result in less bullying. So, we would have introduced “no to violence” days, Spanish day, and foreign language day, and I can tell you that our schools, and our students are busy making the best of this cultural transformation, building back better after COVID, and our children are well engaged, and it is a pleasure to see. Why must I not stand here and say, thank you to the teachers, thank you to the parents, thank you to the students who are doing that?

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly:** Why must I not indicate that the majority of our students are doing positive things? Why must I only focus on the negative and the challenges that we have? Other challenges will always be with us, “we ain't reach” heaven yet. And once we have those challenges, we will continue to work on them, but we will continue to celebrate the students that are doing what they are supposed to do.

There is a system in our schools called the School-Based Intervention Team, and that team is supposed to identify the students that have problems, behavioural, learning, et cetera so that we can more closely connect with them through the Student Support Services. That system was not operating at maximum, and so we have now, in as much as we are looking at behaviour of our students—

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Hon. Member, your initial speaking time has elapsed. You have an additional fifteen minutes. Do you care to avail yourself?

**Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly:** Yes. Mr. Deputy Speaker.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Proceed.

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly (cont'd)

**Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly:**—and we have reintroduced, and we are focusing on this school-based intervention team, even saying to our schools to schedule it as a part of your school day because we need to keep an eye on our students. And that is the early warning system that identifies to us that there are students in need of help, and we have to get to them early. It is much more effective when we get to them early. We have seen a general decrease in the number of infractions including bullying, and extortion. We have seen a general decrease from 2022/23 to 2023/24, and we are into another academic year now where we continue to gather data.

So, we at the Ministry of Education, far from hiding our heads in the sand, we have confronted the issue, we have identified the schools where the issue is most present. We have revised our discipline matrix to ensure that it is relevant to today's problem including cyberbullying. We have worked with the agencies, and continue to work with the agencies that can supply the support. We are working with our children ensuring that the consequences for actions, yes, are enforced. However, we also working on transformative initiatives like remedial education to deal with student performance, the cultural transformation to deal with student engagement, so that we can transform the behaviour of our children, especially those who need it the most. We are seeing, based on the data we are collecting, a reduction in the number of infractions, not that they have gone away, but we are seeing that reduction. We are seeing an increase in the SEA performance that our 80 primary schools are focused. We are seeing an increase in the students who scored under 50, and have taken advantage of the opportunity, and resources, we have seen their performance in increase.

So, we know, and based on our interaction internationally as well, when we attend conferences where we interact with our colleagues from different countries, we can see that we are on the path that will allow us to manage and mitigate this situation.

Bullying is not something that we can get rid of [*Member snaps fingers*] by clicking our fingers. If it were so, 36 years ago, we would not have been speaking about a crisis in school violence and bullying in Trinidad and Tobago.

**4.40 p.m.**

However, the things that the Ministry of Education is doing, the initiatives that we are taking, are bearing fruit, and we are going to continue to consistently apply it, because that, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is one of the main issues, our consistency as a country, in applying the solutions and ensuring that we take the time, collect the data and see that they are bearing fruit over the years. As members of society, we can also help.

Bullying is learned behaviour and I think, based on the events of recent past, tragic events, we can see that we have a societal problem. The response to the bullying was bullying. We have a societal problem. We cannot expect our children to be paragons of virtue when we, as the adults, are not showing them the right example.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly:** So, adults, stop sharing fight videos. Stop it, because what you are doing is creating content heroes. You may not realize it, but there are children who fight, they set up the fight and they set up the recorder to ensure that they have the type of notoriety that they want. Stop

sharing. Let us all make the effort to show a proper example to our children and to speak a proper example to our children. There were times where, regardless of if you are vex with your neighbour, your child could never say anything against your neighbour. No conversation would be held in the earshot of your child about your neighbour. Too many of us are allowing that to happen as well and our children are developing attitudes that are beyond them.

We have to, as parents and as adults, be aware of what help is available for our children. That is important and we have to speak that to our children so that they know also how to get help. And let me say this, every school has a guidance counsellor and a school social worker assigned to the school. Parents, if there is a problem with your child, please seek out the guidance counsellor. You can speak to the principal, speak to the teacher, and get some help for your child within the school. There is counselling available from the Mediation Division of the Ministry of Community Development, avail yourself of that. There is counselling available and help from the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, avail yourself of that. There are resources but they will only be as effective as the people who use them. So I want to encourage us to be aware of what is available.

The Ministry of Health has available resources as well. The suicide hotline, be aware, and let us help our children to be aware as well. Let us stop sharing fake news. Stop sharing violence. Share positive news as well. If we flood our country with positive news, notwithstanding our challenges, let us see the effect that will have on our children. Let us see if the children

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who want to be exposed will not want to do positive things to be able to make the headlines too. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I thank you for the opportunity, as we all do our part to mitigate the scourge of bullying that is in our schools. Thank you.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** I recognize the Member for St. Augustine.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Ms. Khadijah Ameen** (*St. Augustine*): Mr. Deputy Speaker, first of all, I want to thank the Leader of the Opposition for allowing the Member for Princes Town to bring this private motion that resolves for this:

“...House call on the Government to provide adequate support and resources for the protection of our nation’s children against bullying in schools throughout Trinidad and Tobago.”

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I took the time to read the resolve into the record, and for those who are listening, because I was surprised to hear the Speaker before me indicate that the Government should reject this Motion. Is the Government today rejecting a motion saying that they will not provide adequate support and resources for the protection of our nation’s children against bullying?

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Ms. K. Ameen:** Is that what the Government is saying? During the little across-the-floor chit-chat before the Sitting, I saw the Member who is the Leader of Government Business saying, “Sure, of course, they will have our support”. Of course, that was off the record, but Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am deeply shocked that any Member of Government would indicate they are not

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supporting something like that. Unless the Minister of Education is from a different faction in the Government over there.

But Mr. Deputy Speaker, I listened and as I expressed my disappointment, I still have hope. I, like much of Trinidad and Tobago, still have hope that the powers that be would recognize that when elephants fight, it is the grass that gets damaged. And while the Government continues to defend itself and diminish reports and diminish the severity of reports of bullying, it is our children who suffer—

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Ms. K. Ameen:**—and they are suffering because of the neglect of this Government. So when we say it is a societal problem, to hear a Minister say, “it is a cultural issue” as if we cannot change it. To hear all sorts of factors being blamed to say, “this going on 20 years ago, so therefore we should not complain now”. The situation and circumstances in our society that existed 20 years ago in the Clive Pantin days, in former Minister of Education, Clive Pantin. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I remember Clive Pantin visiting my school when I was in First Year with his little curl in his head. Those who were the children in that generation are now adults who are parents of their own. And to say that the problem existed then, and therefore the Opposition should not call on the Government to provide the adequate support, is to me just the Government ducking their responsibility and burying their head in the sand.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Ms. K. Ameen:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, when I say that the Government has a tendency to downplay the issue, I will raise several instances where in the



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Minister's statement and in the Government's statement, they would have done so on different issues pertaining to violence. But what I have seen today, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in this debate is that once again as the Government tends to do, they attack, not the issue you know, they attack the mover of the Motion. The mover of the Motion who came here to speak in defense of our nation's children, who in doing so condemned the underperformance and incompetence of the Government, is being called a bully by those opposite. So rather than deal with the issue, they attack the person who raised the issue. That is par for the course with this PNM Government.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Ms. K. Ameen:** Par for the course. This is the same Government who fired the person from a children's home in Couva for being a whistleblower, and they are talking about protecting whistleblowers. What example are they setting? They are doing the same thing today. I condemn the Members on the opposite side who referred to the Member for Princes Town as a "bully" because his presentation was passionate in defense of our children.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Ms. K. Ameen:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is no secret that the People's Partnership Government, led by Kamla Persad-Bissessar, implemented several transformative initiatives and policies in schools to improve education, and safety, and support in schools. And you know, the PNM has systematically dismantled those initiatives and victimized the children of our nation for the good things that the UNC put in place. And you know what I have been seeing, Mr. Deputy Speaker? There are a number of areas where

this Government threw out what the UNC would have had when they came in in 2015. And then, they started to realize that those things were good things and they are now putting it back in and calling it by a different name. In the meanwhile, the time that they took to dismantle those things, the hurt caused by our children will go over into the next generation.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, bullying in schools has escalated due to increased gang infiltration and extortion. These are not the words of the Opposition. These are not new things being put into the public domain. There is a rise in physical, verbal abuse, cyberbullying, and sexual assaults of students in schools. And sexual assault is part of bullying in our schools.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Ms. K. Ameen:** It is. I recall a parent, whose video was widely circulated on social media, speaking about her daughter being attacked by a bully in school, sexually assaulted. They made police reports, the student was suspended and after the suspension came back to the school and she had to continue in her class facing the person who sexually abused her. Sexual abuse is part of bullying in schools and we have to deal with that as well. We cannot deal with what is happening in the schools without facing the failures of this Government.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Ms. K. Ameen:** There has been a neglect of the guidance counselor and student support system. That is not two years now. I recall when I sat as a Senator, being part of a joint select committee that examined and made several recommendations. One of the concerns with school violence was the number of school social workers and the number of guidance counsellors

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assigned to schools. I heard the Minister in her contribution speak about that they have increased the number of staff members in that department. There were 14 of one and 80 of another occupation. But I will find a note soon. But Mr. Deputy Speaker, I recall that since that JSC met, which would have been around 2018 or so, the shortage in the schools exists today still. They have not fixed the problem.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Ms. K. Ameen:** They have not fixed the problem. Lamenting that just hiring more people is not going to fix the problem is of concern to me because the problem is a shortage of people in the system where vacancies exist for the school social workers, where these guidance counsellors are assigned to schools, and the Minister is correct to say that there are some schools that have their own social worker and their own guidance counsellor, because they are high-risk schools. They have a high incidence of bullying and violence but there are other schools who share school social workers, and therein lies the problem. Therein lies the problem.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Ms. K. Ameen:** In some cases, you have 600 and 800 students assigned to one school social worker. You have to make an appointment when there is an issue. You have to make an appointment to see that school social worker. There is no immediate intervention. And that, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is a failure of the Government—

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Ms. K. Ameen:**—of the Government, not of society, not of the child. There are schools that end up hiring their own person to advise on these issues.

And you know who pays? The students pay. The parents pay. Because when you have a qualified person that is on hand, it is not only when there is a fight or bullying situation that they intervene. Very early signs of behavioural issues can be identified by teachers and the intervention of the guidance counselor and the school social worker could be very critical.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I recall there was an incident in a school in the east. It did not make papers and social media and thing, but what happened—a secondary school. Essentially, there was a young, I think he was Form 2 or Form 3, there was a young student who was bullying other children.

**4.55 p.m.**

One student ended up coming to school with a knife for the bully, and when he brought that weapon to school that was when the teachers intervened. He said, “I am fed up of this bully. I am fed up of this bully.” And the teachers said, “But you have never reported this.” Because that bully was the son of a teacher in the school. When the teachers and the guidance counsellor, who was there, investigated, they realized that this young man had been bullying over 35 of the 38 students interviewed. When they checked with the young man, they realized that his mother was a teacher in the school, but he and his mother were victims of domestic violence. This young man had issues, his hair was falling out and he was under stress himself. He sees his mother being a victim of domestic violence on a daily basis, and then comes to school and takes it out on the other children.

Immediately, before there was any violent situation, before the violence grew, the teachers and the guidance counsellor were able to

intervene and that student was able to receive professional help, along with the teacher, who herself was a victim of domestic violence. And that situation, Mr. Deputy Speaker, indicates that before violence and bullying go to the extent where students have to be expelled from school, there can be interventions. Early signs include late coming. A child coming to school late habitually could indicate they have problems at home. A child coming to school without meals, or coming to school with dirty clothes or dirty uniforms, all of these things are signs, and the qualified persons will know what are the indicators to look for in a child, where you can make an intervention. But when you have 800 students falling under one school social worker, the Government is failing the Trinidad and Tobago children.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Ms. K. Ameen:** The Government is failing them. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I saw where the president of the PTA made a strong statement. I mentioned before that there were several initiatives by the UNC Government that were dismantled by the PNM Government, that they now have to admit, worked. One such initiative was the Community Comfort Patrol. When the PNM came into government, they threw it out the door, but you know, I saw an article from November 2022, where in an interview, the Minister of Education said—and I want to read a little piece of it. This was the *Guardian*, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The Minister said:

“Following frequent reports and social media posts of violence at several secondary schools, the Ministry of Education partnered with the T&T Police Service to implement patrols outside specified schools

and their surroundings to deter students from violent outbursts. It was among several measures taken last April...”

And the Minister further went on:

““We are glad for the police involvement, so it must continue because clearly, it is bearing fruit. It is not just the police presence being a punitive presence...””

This sounds very much like the Community Comfort Patrol, initiated by hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, that the PNM disbanded, that included members of the protective services—various arms of the protective services, private security, the community police, and those trained to deal with children, which was disbanded by the PNM. So here they are now admitting that the initiatives of the UNC Government worked. They are now admitting that.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Ms. K. Ameen:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, I also want to touch on another point. The Minister condemned social media posts, where they are displaying fights and so on, indicating that there are students who set up fights and they do it for the likes, essentially. While I hear the Minister on that, I want to believe that that is in the minority. Social media, as controversial as it is, sheds a light on the truth. That is what it does, it shows the truth. Because a lot of these incidents do not make it to mainstream media. Every day, you have several murders being reported. Who has time for a child who got beat up somewhere down in south or Rio Claro? Who has time for that, in terms of highlighting it on the media? That is what happens.

So the truth of the matter is that the mainstream media does not cover a mother who is begging, “Save my son from these bullies,” and a mother who is saying, “My daughter is being sexually assaulted. Help me.” The mainstream media does not always get to cover many of those stories, so social media has been a means to get the message outside. When you have a government saying that social media—“Lock it down, lock it down,” that is reminiscent of a dictatorial approach and an anti-democratic approach.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Ms. K. Ameen:** And I want to caution the Government that social media is part of free speech, and free speech is part of democracy, so we must be very careful and balanced that we are not infringing on people’s democratic rights. It is because of social media that we know how serious this issue of bullying in schools and school fighting is.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Ms. K. Ameen:** Because the truth is, if we were to listen to this Government, “well, boy, everything rel good, yuh know. Is just has ah few lil cases somewhere in between, yuh know, and things improving”. Every time—

**Mr. Padarath:** [*Inaudible*]

**Ms. K. Ameen:** Every time I hear—

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Again, Member, please, man, it is too obvious. Member for Princes Town, please.

**Ms. K. Ameen:** He is not disturbing me at all.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Again—

**Ms. K. Ameen:** I appreciate the encouragement from my colleague.

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**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** No, no, no. It is not about disturbing you. Right? It is about what we maintain in this Chamber. Proceed.

**Ms. K. Ameen:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, it was because of social media that we knew what happened at St. George's College.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. Member:** [*Inaudible*]

**Ms. K. Ameen:** The truth of St. George's College, I am reminded. St. George's College is my alma mater and I have been looking on with interest. I have been looking on with interest what they are doing to my poor school and you know, you will not see certain things on mainstream media. Who covered the flood, when the school was flooding out, looking like a river? It was social media, through the students. Who was covering the collapsed roof that lasted for years without government intervention? It was social media. Who covered the MP for Barataria/San Juan, Saddam Hosein, questioning the Minister at the—I do not even want to say launch or opening, because it was a partial opening. You cut a ribbon to open a roof that did not build yet. It was our MP for Barataria/San Juan and social media that exposed the truth. So we cannot be telling our citizens, "Take off your phone, social media. No freedom of speech." We have to be very careful. So that is one of the many instances of downplaying the issue.

There was another occasion when the Minister, in that same article in November 2022, the *Guardian* article, indicated that she believes:

"...mobile phones and social media in school contribute to the perception that school violence is worsening."



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“Perception”. “Yuh hear that”? So “all ah we here, is only all yuh perception, okay”?

**Hon. Members:** [*Laughter*]

**Ms. K. Ameen:** I believe the Minister indicated that they were going to review the school’s cellphone policy.

Now, as a parent myself, I too believe that you should limit the use of cellphones in schools, because it disturbs the classroom and our children’s learning ability. But to say that the social media coverage of school fights is just increasing the perception but school violence is not really that bad, it is another instance of the Government burying their heads in the sand.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Ms. K. Ameen:** The PNM is totally out of touch with reality. I saw another article where the TTUTA President, Mr. Martin Lum Kin, was saying, again, something that I have said on previous occasions:

“...that the Student Support Services Division...is severely understaffed and underresourced.”

He was acknowledging:

“...that teachers are doing their best with the limited resources available but he...”—was stressing—“...that the Ministry of Education must take immediate steps to...resource the...”—division.

The Minister’s failure to expand the services has left vulnerable students without critical intervention. Those are the words of the TTUTA President, not the UNC. So the truth is the truth, no matter how you try to twist it.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister and the PNM continues to be totally out of touch with reality. There are numerous other instances when the

Minister would have said that school violence is on the decline. Mr. Deputy Speaker, violence on a whole in Trinidad and Tobago is on the increase under this PNM Government.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Ms. K. Ameen:** On a whole. That was in May of 2022. On another occasion, in November of that same year, the article said:

The Minister then, in November 2022, continued to boast about decline in school violence, despite the daily viral videos of school fight and violence.

That was the headline. So who is burying their heads in the sand here?

After a few months, school violence is surging out of control—another *Guardian* article. And you know, it just continues, where stakeholders, on a whole, are condemning the school violence situation; stakeholders on a whole. And you know, our stakeholders are very important in education.

Today, I want to commend the Leader of the Opposition for a series of town hall meetings that she has been hosting throughout Trinidad and Tobago.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Ms. K. Ameen:** Initially, it was an anti-crime town hall meeting, where you had people in San Fernando, people in Chaguanas, you had in Morvant, you had Port-of-Spain and you had in the east, in Sangre Grande, you had thousands of people throughout Trinidad, coming out to express their concerns and give solutions. And their solutions—you find people who are experts in the field coming forward to give recommendations. You find

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young people who have their views, which would be a different perspective, and those things are very valuable to any government. I want to ask, which stakeholders is the Government engaging?

It was two Mondays ago, the Opposition Leader held one of these town meetings, specifically on education, interestingly, and one of our feature speakers there was Dr. Michael Dowlath, who is a retired principal of Naparima College. He had several recommendations. Now, this is a person who spent his entire life in education. He has a doctorate

**Mr. Charles:** “He coming for de Maserati”.

**Ms. K. Ameen:**—and he might very well be replacing the Member for San Fernando West in the very near future.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Ms. K. Ameen:** But during that—

**Mr. Al Rawi SC:** [*Inaudible*]

**Hon. Members:** [*Interruption*]

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Please, Members. Please, Members.

**Hon. Member:** “He coming for de Lamborghini”.

**Ms. K. Ameen:** During that town hall meeting, Dr. Dowlath made several, very interesting and relevant recommendations that I think this Government could learn something from.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Ms. K. Ameen:** But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, what they did not do in nine years, I do not think they could do in nine months.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

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**Ms. K. Ameen:** So the best thing would be to just bow out, go your way, thank the people of Trinidad and Tobago for tolerating you for 10 years, and allow the UNC Government to come in and get the job done.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. Member:** “De Volkswagen coming for de Maserati”.

**Ms. K. Ameen:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to touch on another issue that the Minister raised, that I had intended to raise about extracurricular activities. The Minister spoke about the value of sport, theater arts, music, pan, the school’s music festival, the school panorama, school’s kitchen gardens, and all these initiatives. I do agree that there are students who are sometimes only motivated to come because of that particular activity that they are so passionate about. You see wonderful musicians emerging from areas that are considered depressed areas, students who—getting involved in music is scientifically proven to help students be better in academics. It is something that is proven.

**5.25 p.m.**

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to take this opportunity, to plead with the Members opposite who have to speak after, in this debate—I think we went a little off with the two Members, who spoke earlier, and I feel we could bring it back to some sensibility.

**Hon. Member:** Yeah.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. Member:** Yeah.

**Ms. K. Ameen:** Right. I really think this is not the opportunity to attack the Member for Princes Town. He is only the messenger. The issue that we

have to attack is the bullying and getting our children in a safe space to learn. Let us take the recommendations, whether they come from—if you do not want to take the Opposition's recommendations, there are experts in field, who have made recommendations similar to ours, and you can implement their recommendations. You cannot say that you do not want to just hire more people, because you are under staff. You cannot say that you do not want to spend more money. Money being spent in education, is not money being spent, it is money being invested. And you must continue to invest in our children in Trinidad and Tobago. And part of that investment must be putting aside petty politics and the blame game, and coming together. Because you are in charge. You are in charge, and you must deal with it.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Ms. K. Ameen:** Deal with the bullies in the school. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to thank you for this opportunity. But I also want to say, that I have looked on as this Government—well is more than nine years now, so I have to say almost 10 years. It is almost 10 years they have been in charge. It is almost 10 years they have been in Government. They have gone full circle from dismantling all the excellent initiatives of the UNC Government, and coming back around now, to realize that they were good things, and now putting it in a different way. And very often it is a water-down version. Because the United National Congress operated, with—

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Member, you have two minutes.

**Ms. K. Ameen:**—world standards. We operated with world standards. We operated with international standards.

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**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Ms. K. Ameen:** And when we implemented programmes, these were from first world countries. And we must not believe that we in Trinidad and Tobago are less than. And the Government is watering down these things, but they are admitting slowly that these were good initiatives. So, I think, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we have gone past the time where we have to plead with the Government, to please do something. Please save our children. Please help our nation. Please protect us from criminals. Please protect us from murderers. We have gone past that. It is really time to just allow them to move and return the United Nation Congress to government.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Ms. K. Ameen:** I thank you.

**Dr. Moonilal:** Well said. Well said.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Member for Tobago East.

**The Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister—Gender and Child Affairs (Hon. Ayanna Webster-Roy):** Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to contribute to this debate. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the issue of bullying is very important and it deserved to be discussed in this august Chamber. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I remember in high school, I got suspended from school for fighting—

**Hon. Member:** What?

**Hon. A. Webster-Roy:**—but when you get into the details, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I was a young girl from countryside Tobago, going to school in town, and being bullied for quite a while. And an evening after school, one of the bullies decided to attack me, and I decided to stand up for myself.

Unfortunately, I fought back. Maybe I fought back too strong; I was suspended from school, Mr. Deputy Speaker. But, coming out from that experience, I had the opportunity to build a very close and meaningful relationship with my then guidance officer, Ms. Samira Melville. I remember the name quite well. Ms. Melville gave me the opportunity to learn to cope with the emotions that I was experiencing from being bullied, but also to learn strategies and ways to respond, instead of having to resort to my fist, when being attacked, and thankfully learning to cope with all the issues within the high school.

So being bullied—being forced to defend yourself—when you defend yourself, you are suspended. Mr. Deputy Speaker, my story is not new, and it is not unique. There are a number of children throughout Trinidad and Tobago who would have encountered similar situations. It is quite unfortunate that today, when we should have been discussing this issue in a manner that would brought about some healing and opportunities for us to learn from each other, ways and strategies to improve the circumstances for our nation's children, we sort of took it down a path that, for me in a sense, took away some of the meaning behind what we are supposed to do today.

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

**Hon. A. Webster-Roy:** Madam Speaker, in preparing for this debate, I did not look at bullying just in the instance of schools, because when you really dissect the issue and look at it, and confront it, we have an epidemic, a societal epidemic that we call bullying. And it does not just manifest itself in the classroom, it manifests itself within our society. Sometimes, it manifests itself within this very august Chamber. It manifests itself in many

places. But when you get down to the root of bullying, as the Member for Fyzabad, did and went into the medicine behind it—the science behind it, Madam Speaker. We would recognize that it boils down to violence. And what do we do as a society to start combating violence in all its forms? What do we do as a society to become more tolerant, more caring, more loving? What do we do as a society to educate and empower all our citizens, so that we all become meaningful contributors towards ending the scourge of violence and ending the scourge of bullying within our schools and our communities?

Madam Speaker, at the Office of the Prime Minister, Gender and Child Affairs, we have been taking, an all-of-government approach, when it comes to treating with issues around violence. Particularly, when violence affects our children and our vulnerable families. We have been partnering with the Ministry of Education. We have been working with the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. We have been collaborating with the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service. We have been lending our support, and our skills, and our techniques, and our services, to the Ministry of Sport and Community Development, where they have been ramping up the services, available through their community mediation unit.

But, Madam Speaker, what we would have developed as Government—trying to tackle issues around crime and violence, especially gender-based violence, is what we call, the National Strategic Action Plan, to end gender-based violence and sexual violence in Trinidad and Tobago. The Member for St. Augustine, just spoke about, instances of bullying that



would have been sexual in nature, and instances of bullying that would of— what we would identify as being linked to gender-based violence.

Madam Speaker, for the NSAP to work, what we need more than the Government leading and doing its part, is for all of Trinidad and Tobago, to become a part of the process. What we need, is not just a whole-of-government—all-of-government approach—but a whole-of-society approach, bringing together all segments of society, embracing the NSAP, and implementing—making it work for the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Recognizing, Madam Speaker, that Government cannot do it alone, and that we need all hands on deck. We would have developed two committees to help monitor the implementation of the NSAP. One is a technical working group that would encompass technical staff from various Ministries and agencies. But then, another is a national steering committee that is going to be a high-level committee, reporting directly to Cabinet influencing policy.

Madam Speaker, one of the recommendations that would have been made for the national steering committee, is for a member of the Opposition, to sit on that committee. So, if the Opposition is really serious about addressing violence in all its forms, including bullying, I am eagerly anticipating correspondence to come back from the Leader of the Opposition, identifying the person from the Opposition Bench, who would sit on this national steering committee, and work alongside us in Government, as we implement and roll out the NSAP, to reduce all forms of violence in Trinidad and Tobago.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**5.50 p.m.**

One of the key activities of the standing committee on child protection is a review of all the intervention programmes available nationally because we want to know what we have. Is it working? What should we change? What should we invest in more? What areas should we reconsider? So, Madam Speaker, I am pleased to let the public know that very soon, that project will go up for tender, and this is a collaborative effort between the Office of the Prime Minister as well as the Judiciary, all under the umbrella of the standing committee on child protection.

Madam Speaker, one of the things I said to my Permanent Secretary recently, I said, “PS, the same way we say that we want the Opposition to be involved in the steering committee, that big oversight level, maybe there is consideration that we also have the Opposition involved at that standing committee level.” Because, Madam Speaker, they also help us, in terms of bringing about good governance and order, so we need to have all voices on board, all hands on deck, if we say we are truly following a whole-of-society approach.

Madam Speaker, it is unfortunate that we would have used an opportunity to educate the public and politicize it today. I heard the Member for Princes Town going on and on about one particular instance and one particular funeral. Any life lost is one too many.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. A. Webster-Roy:** I give that. I extend, again, my sincerest condolences to the family of Jayden. But to turn up to a funeral and to give a hug and a kiss, that is fine, but to be present here—I am not seeing the Member for Siparia. She was at the funeral but I am not seeing her here in

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the House today, to lend her voice to the discussion and to the discourse to help us create strategies.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*].

**Hon. A. Webster-Roy:** I would have preferred to get the voice and the presence today, helping us to save another life tomorrow, instead of just going somewhere from the optics and for the clicks and the camera. Sometimes we have to take the politics out of things and serve from the heart.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. A. Webster-Roy:** Madam Speaker, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services has been working with families because today it was said that “The problem is not just the children, the problem is the families.” The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services has been working with our families to empower our families, to help some of our most vulnerable families. As a matter of fact, I think it was yesterday that Ministry launched a parenting programme—

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. A. Webster-Roy:**—because we recognize that, yes, our children may spend some hours in the schools but ultimately, they belong to families, and the families are the ones charged with the responsibility of raising the children.

Madam Speaker, I remember a few years ago, when my hon. Prime Minister spoke about a certain issue and called out families, and people said, “We doh want him, we doh wah de Government, we doh wah all yuh in we homes and in our bedrooms,” but, Madam Speaker, we cannot say it one

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way and not the other. If it is that we want the Government to take charge and tell you how to mind your children, how to raise your children, fine, we could do it, but if it is that we are saying that we want the Government to not be too intrusive, then we have to do it together.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. A. Webster-Roy:** Families must take up their responsibility. The Government, we will take up our responsibility. Opposition, take up your responsibility. With all of us holding hands, we will build Trinidad and Tobago together, Madam Speaker.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. A. Webster-Roy:** So, Madam Speaker, through the parenting programme, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, that Ministry will be giving parents and families the tools to learn how to manage their children, so when their children leave their homes and enter into different spaces, they are not entering into different spaces as hurt, angry people but children who are well grounded, children who understand how they are supposed to operate, and understand their role and their space in this developing Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service has been doing a lot of work to capture our young people and to empower them, so that they—I think it was my colleague, the Minister of Education, said, “Hurt people, hurt people,” and the Member for St. Augustine said, “There is an absence of hope, so people are becoming hurt,” but the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service, through the various programmes and initiatives that they are rolling out, is creating that

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avenue for hope—

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. A. Webster-Roy:**—giving our young people the opportunity to develop training and skills, so that when they enter into society, when they are out there in the real world, doing what they are doing, they are coming from a place of positivity.

Madam Speaker, I strongly believe that if we work together, if we really work in the best interest of our children, if we recognize where we have shortcomings and we work on improving on our shortcomings, if we recognize where we need to lend more support and we work on lending more support, then we could really turn around the tide, Madam Speaker, and reduce the level of violence in Trinidad and Tobago. Madam Speaker, we have to start being more mindful, being more mindful of each other, being more mindful of the way we communicate with each other. We have to be more caring, Madam Speaker.

We have to teach our children to look out for each other. We have to go back to the good old days when the village was actually looking out for the children and raising the children. Madam Speaker, laws will not bring about the change unless they are fully implemented and there is full buy-in. Madam Speaker, what I want to do is to challenge every citizen of Trinidad and Tobago to do some introspection. Let us start looking at ourselves as individuals and ask the question, “What can I do differently? How can I improve me, to become a better version of myself, so that I could become a meaningful contributor to national development?” Madam Speaker, this not “PNM wuk alone”, this is for all of us to do as citizens.

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**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. A. Webster-Roy:** Madam Speaker, I am very passionate about this issue because, as I would have said at the beginning, I lived it. I was bullied. I got suspended from school. I am raising three children—

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. A. Webster-Roy:**—and I want to ensure that I do my best, because it is not just for my three children, Madam Speaker, because when they are out there, they are going to interact with everybody else's children, so that is why I am committed to doing by best. I am sure all my colleagues—my colleague, the Member for St. Ann's East, she is a mother.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. A. Webster-Roy:** She knows the pain, she carried a child for nine months too. My colleague, the Member for D'Abadie/O'Meara, she knows the pain, she carried her children for nine months too, Madam Speaker. When we work here for the nation's children—

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. A. Webster-Roy:**—we understand what it is to be raising children in an uncertain and sometimes difficult world. So we are not lazy. We have been doing our best.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. A. Webster-Roy:** Madam Speaker, all we ask is for the rest of Trinidad and Tobago to walk with us on this journey. Help us to become the best version of ourselves as legislators, so we could get the best version of ourselves as Trinbagonians.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

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**Hon. A. Webster-Roy:** Madam Speaker, I thank you for the opportunity to contribute.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Madam Speaker:** Member for Chaguanas East.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Ms. Vandana Mohit (Chaguanas East):** Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, for the opportunity to contribute to this debate. With my one minute remaining, I will—you know—start today by saying, I wish to really thank the Member for Princes Town for bringing to this House—

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Ms. V. Mohit:**—such a critical Motion, which is affecting our nation's children. I wish to also thank the Leader of the Opposition for her continuous encouragement to us, as Members of the Opposition, to continue to raise pressing issues affecting our citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Ms. V. Mohit:** Madam Speaker, in bringing this Motion, the Member for Princes Town said here today that the issue of bullying has been happening a long time ago. He did not blame the Government.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Ms. V. Mohit:** He said it is an issue that has been happening a long time ago and the UNC is willing to work with you, the Government—

**Madam Speaker:** Leader of the House.

## ADJOURNMENT

**The Minister of Housing and Urban Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis):** Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam

Speaker, I beg to move that this House do now adjourn to a date to be fixed.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*House adjourned accordingly.*

*Adjourned at 6.00 p.m.*