



## 1<sup>st</sup> Report

JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE ON

**SOCIAL SERVICES**

AND

**PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION**

**On An**

**An inquiry into the effects of the hybrid/blended learning system on student performance in government and government-assisted schools during the revised COVID-19 restrictions.**

FIRST SESSION (2020/2021) 12<sup>TH</sup> PARLIAMENT  
OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

# 1<sup>st</sup> REPORT

OF THE

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

ON AN

**INQUIRY INTO THE EFFECTS OF THE HYBRID/BLENDED LEARNING  
SYSTEM ON STUDENT PERFORMANCE IN GOVERNMENT AND  
GOVERNMENT-ASSISTED SCHOOLS DURING THE REVISED COVID-19  
RESTRICTIONS**

**Date Laid in the HoR:** 02.07.21

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<http://www.ttparliament.org/reports/p12-s1-J-20210702-SSPA-R1.pdf>

**The Joint Select Committee on Social Services and Public Administration**

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## THE COMMITTEE

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Mr. Paul Richards  
**CHAIRMAN**

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Mr. Esmond Forde, MP  
**VICE-CHAIRMAN**



Ms. Penelope Beckles, MP  
**MEMBER**

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Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh, MP  
**MEMBER**



Mr. Rohan Sinanan  
**MEMBER**

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Roger Munroe, MP  
**MEMBER**



Mr. Avinash Singh  
**MEMBER**

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Mr. David Nakhid  
**MEMBER**

## Committee Mandate and Establishment

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

## **Powers of the Joint Select Committee**

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

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

## **Membership**

1.1.5 The Committee comprises the following members:

1. Mr. Paul Richards	Chairman
2. Mr. Esmond Forde, MP	Vice-Chairman
3. Mr. Roger Munroe, MP	Member
4. Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh, MP	Member
5. Mr. Rohan Sinanan	Member
6. Mrs. Penelope Beckles-Robinson	Member
7. Mr. David Nakhid	Member
8. Mr. Avinash Singh	Member

## **Change in Membership**

1.1.6 By resolution of the Senate on January 12, 2021, Mr. Avinash Singh was appointed a Member of the Committee in lieu of Ms. Allyson West.

## **Secretariat Support**

1.1.7 The following officers were assigned to assist the Committee:

1. Mr. Julien Ogilvie	-	Secretary
2. Mr. Brian Lucio	-	Assistant Secretary
3. Ms. Aaneesa Baksh	-	Researcher
4. Ms. Nicole Brown	-	Researcher

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## **ABBREVIATIONS**

APPSSTT	Association of Principals of Public Secondary Schools of Trinidad and Tobago
APPSTT	Association of Principals of Public Secondary Schools of Trinidad and Tobago
ASJA	Anjuman Sunnat ul Jamaat Association Board of Education
CODO	Consortium of Disability Organisations
LMS	Learning Management System
MOE	Ministry of Education
MPADT	Ministry of Public Administration and Digital Transformation
NAPSPA	National Primary Schools Principals Association
NPSPA	National Primary Schools Principals Association
SATT	Support Autism Trinidad and Tobago
SDMS	Sanatan Dharma Maha Saba Board of Education
SSSD	Students Support Services Division
TATT	Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago
THA	Tobago House of Assembly
TSTT	Telecommunications Services of Trinidad and Tobago
TTUTA	Trinidad and Tobago Unified Teachers Association

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2.1.1. At its second (2<sup>nd</sup>) meeting held on Wednesday November 25, 2020, the Committee resolved to inquire into the hybrid learning system proposed by the Ministry of Education in response to the COVID-19 crisis in Trinidad and Tobago. The Committee agreed on the following inquiry objectives:

**Objective 1: To assess the effectiveness of the hybrid/blended learning system used by government and government-assisted schools in curriculum delivery.**

**Objective 2: To compare and contrast student performance using traditional versus hybrid/blended learning systems for similar time periods.**

**Objective 3: To examine the systems and methods used to monitor and evaluate student performance in the hybrid/blended learning environment.**

**Objective 4: To assess the readiness of the hybrid/blended learning system to adequately prepare students for external examinations.**

2.1.2. The Committee acquired both oral and written evidence based on the objectives listed above. Oral evidence was received during four (4) public hearings held with various stakeholders (*See Appendix II and III*) on January 20, 2021, February 17, 2021, March 17, 2021 and April 21, 2021. Some of the significant issues highlighted during the inquiry were:

- i. Unequal access to devices and internet connectivity among students
- ii. The need for targeted support for students with Special Needs
- iii. The need for standard procedures to measure and monitor student performance
- iv. The need for additional human and financial resources for Student Support Services to provide psycho-social support for vulnerable student groups
- v. Limited data to support policies for hybrid/blended learning

2.1.3. The Committee looks forward to reviewing the Minister's response to this Report, which becomes due, sixty (60) days after it is presented to the Houses of Parliament.

## **SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are key recommendations proffered by the Committee:

### **Objective 1: To assess the effectiveness of the hybrid/blended learning system used by government and government-assisted schools in curriculum delivery**

- A. The Support system for Special Needs students to be strengthened via greater collaboration among stakeholders to improve educational outcomes for Special Needs students. This can be done in the form of a multi-sectoral taskforce charged with the responsibility of ensuring that a greater percentage of Special Needs students are in receipt of educational support.
- B. The Ministry of Education needs to develop targeted intervention strategies for vulnerable students, namely those with special needs, low-performing students and students from low-income families.
- C. The Ministry of Education in conjunction with the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs needs to address legislative deficiencies with regard to enrolment of Special Needs Students in mainstream education as there have been challenges with interpreting the Education Act Chap 39:01.
- D. As part of this Ministerial Response, the Ministry of Education should provide an update on the Inclusive Education Project and adaptations required to facilitate Special Needs Students in a hybrid/blended learning environment.
- E. The Ministry of Education, in collaboration with the Ministry of Public Administration and Digital Transformation and the Internet Service Providers should conduct a feasibility study on the use of itinerant mobile hotspots to provide internet access in communities without connectivity.
- F. The Ministry of Education should conduct an analysis on the effectiveness on the types of devices used by students. For example, the Ministry could look at how the use of smartphones and tablets versus laptops and desktops affect curriculum delivery.

- G. For vulnerable students that still rely on the printed packages, the MOE could consider partnering with TTPOST and private courier companies to distribute packages to student homes on a regular schedule. This project can commence with a pilot initiative in one densely populated educational district.
- H. The Ministry of Education in collaboration with stakeholders serving Special Needs students should conduct a gap analysis on the assistive technologies required by Special Needs students.
- I. The Ministry of Education should develop a communication and outreach strategy to emphasise the importance of education to parents and guardians.
- J. Viewership of the Ministry's programmes on TTT Live and other channels needs to be measured and evaluated for effectiveness.
- K. The Ministry of Education should conduct research on the school dropout rate and develop targeted interventions based on these findings.
- L. The Ministry of Education should use findings from research conducted on the hybrid/blended educational system to inform adjustments to the National Curriculum as it relates to both using ICTs in Education Delivery and equipping students for the knowledge-based economy.
- M. The Ministry of Education should consider assigning more guidance counsellors and social workers to school districts. This deployment should be based on a needs assessment and analysis.
- N. The MOE should create an adapted curriculum to include application of information technology skills across disciplines.
- O. The MOE in Collaboration with the MPADT should develop satellite schools using community centres, religious institutions and other community-based spaces that can facilitate adequate social distancing/ where students and parents can access learning resources.
- P. The MOE shall give an update on the man power of the SSSD and include the following:
  - i. The breakdown of number of persons assigned to the Division by portfolio;

- ii. The number of persons assigned between January 2021 and July, 2021 (include portfolios); and
- iii. The vacancies of the SSSD as at July 2021.

### **Objective 2: To compare and contrast student performance using traditional versus hybrid/blended learning systems for similar time periods**

- A. The Ministry of Education in collaboration with the various school boards should develop a targeted intervention plan for under-performing students to receive remedial tutoring. Types of tutoring support programmes could include peer tutoring as well as harnessing the networks of past student associations to recruit alumni volunteer tutors.
- B. The Ministry of Education should strengthen initiatives to train parents of vulnerable students on how to effectively use digital learning platforms. This solution may involve creating video tutorials that can be viewed on demand.
- C. As part of its Ministerial Response to this Report, the Ministry of Education should indicate and share any research conducted to compare student performance in the traditional learning system with student performance in the hybrid/blended learning system.

### **Objective 3: To examine the systems and methods used to monitor and evaluate student performance in the hybrid/blended learning environment**

- A. The Ministry of Education should conduct an evaluation of the assessment tools and strategies used by teachers during the pandemic. The results should be used to develop an assessment policy for the online learning environment inclusive of rubrics.

The Ministry of Education should develop an honour code system. As part of this system, both parents/guardians and students should sign an agreement to uphold the integrity of the assessment process.

- B. Given the additional expense to procure software used to monitor and assess students, the MOE could consider collaborating with the Ministry of Public Administration and Digital

Transformation and Private Sector Information Technology professionals to develop monitoring and evaluation software suitable to the local education environment.

- C. The Ministry of Education in collaboration with Special Education stakeholders should develop policies and guides for assessing the performance of Special Needs students in the Online Learning Environment.
- D. The Ministry of Education needs to ensure that Teacher's Aides are assigned to a greater number of students who require this type of support. Given existing resource constraints confronting the Ministry, the deployment of these Aids can be done following a standardised needs assessment of students.

**Objective 4: To assess the readiness of the hybrid/blended learning system to adequately prepare students for external examinations**

- A. The MOE should conduct research on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on both preparations for CSEC and CAPE examinations and the results.
- B. The MoE should collaborate with its regional counterparts to request that CXC consider the various variables and conditions generated that the pandemic which are adversely impacting the preparation of Secondary school students for the high-stake examinations of CSEC and CAPE.

## INTRODUCTION

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### *Background*

- 3.1.1. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on education systems across the world. With school closures implemented as one approach to control the spread of the virus, many jurisdictions have adopted strategies to keep students safe while allowing them to continue with their education. Some of these strategies included online learning, blended learning and hybrid learning systems.
- 3.1.2. The University of the West Indies St. Augustine describes the online learning environment as one where “there is 100% online course delivery with little or no face-to-face sessions.”<sup>1</sup> According to a Cambridge University World of Better Learning article, though used interchangeably, **blended learning** “describes courses that have both online and face-to-face elements” while **hybrid learning** “is when the teacher and some students are having a face-to-face lesson in a physical classroom while quarantined or high-risk students join in online.”<sup>2</sup>
- 3.1.3. Despite intentions to adopt a primarily hybrid learning system, due to a spike in COVID-19 cases, with the exception of Secondary School students sitting external examinations, the Ministry of Education in Trinidad and Tobago has primarily utilised an online learning system since the start of the pandemic.

### *Access to Devices*

- 3.1.4. Given the emphasis placed on virtual learning, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago has made an effort to supply the nation’s students with electronic devices and internet connectivity. In preparation for the 2020/2021 academic year, it was initially estimated that approximately 60,000 students did not have access to electronic devices.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://sta.uwi.edu/cetl/what-difference-between-online-and-blended-learning>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.cambridge.org/elt/blog/2021/03/05/hybrid-blended-synchronous-asynchronous-how-do-take-your-online-teaching/>

3.1.5. As at September 01, 2020, the revised estimate was 65,000<sup>3</sup>. By January 2021, due to the combine efforts of the Government, private sector and citizens to provide devices to students, the figure was reduced to an estimated 30,000 students<sup>4</sup>.

As a contingency to the virtual learning system, students without access to online education were required to complete printed packets prepared by teachers on a weekly basis.

### ***Adjustments Made to the 2020/2021 School Re-Opening Plan***

3.1.6. The following key proposals were announced at the Ministry of Education’s press conference held on August 28, 2020<sup>5</sup>:

- a) Students were not required to report to school. However, school buildings were to remain open to provide resources to teachers;
- b) to facilitate a hybrid curriculum, teachers were required to receive training for both online teaching and the preparation of printed packages for students;
- c) the Ministry produced Curriculum guidelines for online teaching which teachers were expected to consult;
- d) the business community agreed to assist with providing students with devices through an “adopt a School” initiative to supplement the resources of the State;
- e) collaborations were established with the two main telecommunication services providers (BMobile and Digicel) and the industry’s regulator (Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago) with a view to determining what assistance could be afforded to needy students;
- f) reducing the SEA curriculum; and
- g) the reconfiguring of the School feeding program to allow for at home delivery to students. It was proposed that 500 lunches would be delivered to MP offices in each constituency on a daily basis.

3.1.7. The Minister of Education in her presentation during the Appropriation Bill 2020 debate<sup>6</sup> stated that teaching and learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic has been “the most difficult

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<sup>3</sup> [https://trinidadexpress.com/newsextra/65-000-pupils-have-no-digital-access-govt-appeals-for-devices/article\\_cd98e320-e94c-11ea-857c-57484d4a0b4e.html](https://trinidadexpress.com/newsextra/65-000-pupils-have-no-digital-access-govt-appeals-for-devices/article_cd98e320-e94c-11ea-857c-57484d4a0b4e.html)

<sup>4</sup> <https://newsday.co.tt/2021/01/03/30000-students-still-without-devices-for-online-classes/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.moe.gov.tt/6147-2-3-2-4-3-2-2-2-2-2/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.ttparliament.org/hansards/hh20201012.pdf>, Pages 165-172

challenge probably in recent history.” The Minister indicated that as of October 2020, the Ministry of Education was focused on the following:

- a) providing the framework for home-based learning;
- b) providing teachers and students with suitable devices, training and resources for home-based learning;
- c) sourcing funding for the provision of e-books and other online resources for students;
- d) providing a robust Learning Management System for the use by students, parents, teachers, administrators and policymakers; and
- e) designing the framework for blended learning and the integration of technology into the curriculum so that the gains made over this most difficult time become a permanent feature of the education system.

3.1.8. The Minister noted that as of September 2020, 176,000 students were expected to engage in teaching and learning activities, whether through online or printed packages. At the time of the Minister’s presentation, she stated that “90 percent of these students are engaged in online classes with the other 10 percent collecting packaged work, whether by hard copy or by electronic means.”<sup>7</sup>

3.1.9. Other initiatives highlighted by the Minister included the following:

- a) The Ministry of Education providing content for all levels and subject areas of the primary school curriculum that is actively being created and loaded on to the Learning Management System (LMS) as well as shown in partnership with TTT on Channel 4 as well as all the major cable providers
- b) The Ministry of Education providing weekly pull-outs in the print media with content suitable for infants as well as ECCE students
- c) The Ministry of Education would continue providing ongoing daily radio features for ECCE students

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.



### ***Policy Environment: Provisions in 2020/2021 Budget for Electronic Learning***

3.1.10. For the 2020/2021 fiscal year, the Ministry of Education was allocated a total of \$5,253,783,830.00 or 9.3%% of the National Budget<sup>8</sup>.

3.1.11. In his Budget Statement 2021, the Minister of Finance indicated that \$50 million had been set aside to acquire and distribute computers to needy students. This was planned as a joint initiative by the ministries of Education; Public Information and Digital Transformation; and Social Development and Family Services. He also indicated that with effect from September 5, 2020, taxes would be removed from computers and tablets “in time for the re-opening of all schools and educational institutions.”<sup>9</sup> The Minister also noted that “**MiFi, a mobile device which uses the 3G/ 4G mobile phone networks to create a mini wireless hotspot... would be provided to 45,000 students who do not have internet access in their homes or surrounding areas.** This programme was planned to come into effect in the first quarter of calendar 2021”.<sup>10</sup>

### ***Global Perspective***

3.1.12. The challenges faced by the Education sector in Trinidad and Tobago are not unique. This fallout in education has been so grave that the United Nations Secretary General stated that without strategic intervention, there could be a “**generational catastrophe,**”<sup>11</sup> particularly when it comes to children from developing countries. The United Nations estimates that with almost half a billion school-aged individuals being affected by school closures, “**at least one-third of the world’s students have been deprived of any form of learning.**”<sup>12</sup>

3.1.13. The deputy UN chief has stated that the most vulnerable students are at high risk of dropping out of school completely, never to return. The article indicated that The United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has engaged in consultations to

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<sup>8</sup> Financial Scrutiny Unit, Office of the Parliament, *Trinidad and Tobago Budget Summary: Ministry of Education*, October 2020

<sup>9</sup> Ministry of Finance, *Ministry of Finance Budget Statement 2021: Resetting the Economy for Growth and Innovation*, October 2020, page 62

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, page 114

<sup>11</sup> <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/10/1075982>

<sup>12</sup> <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/10/1075982>

develop a draft Global Education Meeting (GEM) Declaration. The UN Deputy Secretary General indicated, that for this Declaration to be implemented, there must be “a reimagining of education; a dramatic push to train millions of teachers...scaling up of partnerships to connect every school, teacher and learner to the internet; and...equipping young people with the skills they need to thrive in a complex and rapidly changing world.”<sup>13</sup> The article underscored the importance of making education a high priority in the global COVID-19 response. At the one-year mark of the pandemic, the Executive Director of UNICEF stated that lockdowns have “created and education emergency worldwide.”

3.1.14. According to Save the Children, “children across the world have lost an average of **74 days of education each due to school closures and a lack of access to remote learning— more than a third of the standard global 190-day school year.**” For the World’s poorest countries, the statistics paint an even grimmer picture whereby “children in Latin America and the Caribbean, and South Asia, are missed out on almost triple the education of children in Western Europe with students in Latin America, the Caribbean and South Asia missing approximately 110 days of education each.”

3.1.15. The table below, created from data in the aforementioned Save the Children report compares the average number of days of schooling lost per child by region.

*Table 1 Days of Education Lost by Region*

<b>Region</b>	<b>Average number of education days lost</b>
Sub-Saharan Africa	69
East Asia and the Pacific	47
Europe and Central Asia	45
Western Europe alone	38
Latin America and the Caribbean	110

3.1.16. Save the Children also indicated that the impact of children missing school could have social repercussions such as being “exposed to a higher risk of child labour, child marriage and other forms of abuse, and are more likely to be trapped in a cycle of poverty for generations to come.”<sup>14</sup>The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

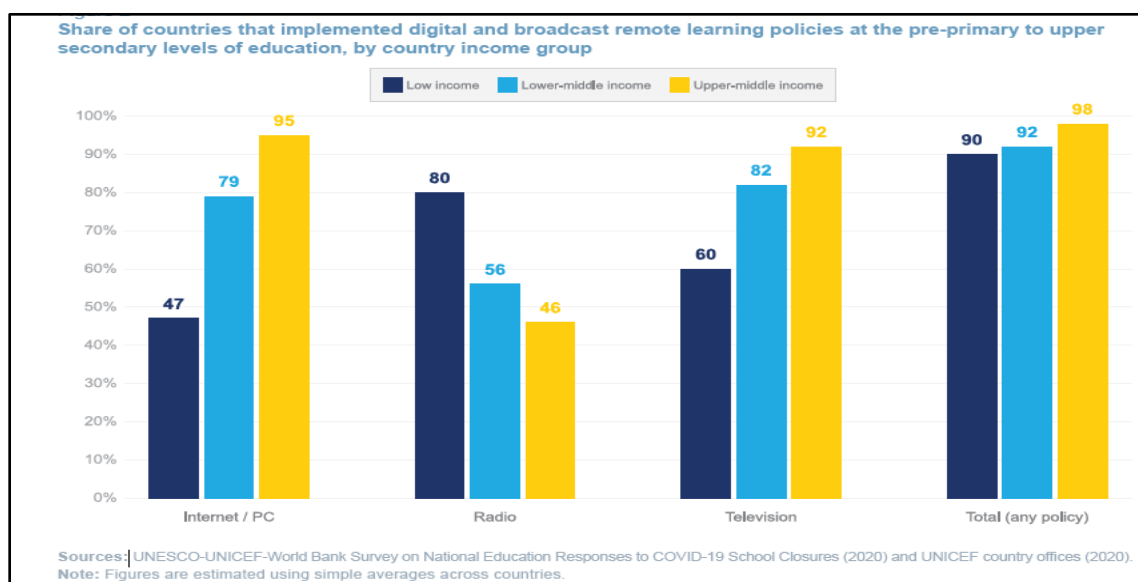
indicated that in 2020, there was a 20% increase in the number of children with reading difficulties, effectively “wiping out two decades of education gains.”<sup>15</sup>

3.1.17. These statistics indicate that there must be a concerted approach at the State level to reduce inequalities in access to education to ensure that the COVID-19 pandemic does not create a secondary crisis within the student population. In responding to the educational disruption caused by school closures,

### **Global Statistical Overview**

3.1.18. An August 2020 UNICEF report provided the following statistics based on income classification. The findings have been summarized below<sup>16</sup>:

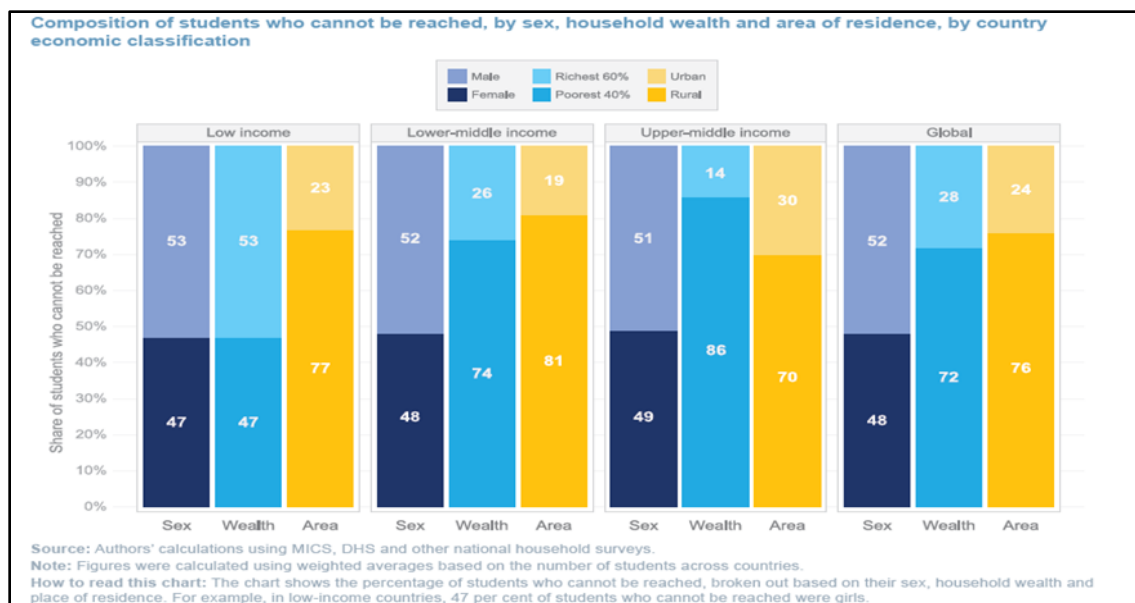
**Figure 1** below shows that **95% of upper income countries** utilized Internet-based technology to reach students while only **47% of lower income countries** utilized the same technology. Radio was highly utilized among low income countries (80%). Television was utilized by 92% of upper-middle income countries and 60% of low income countries.



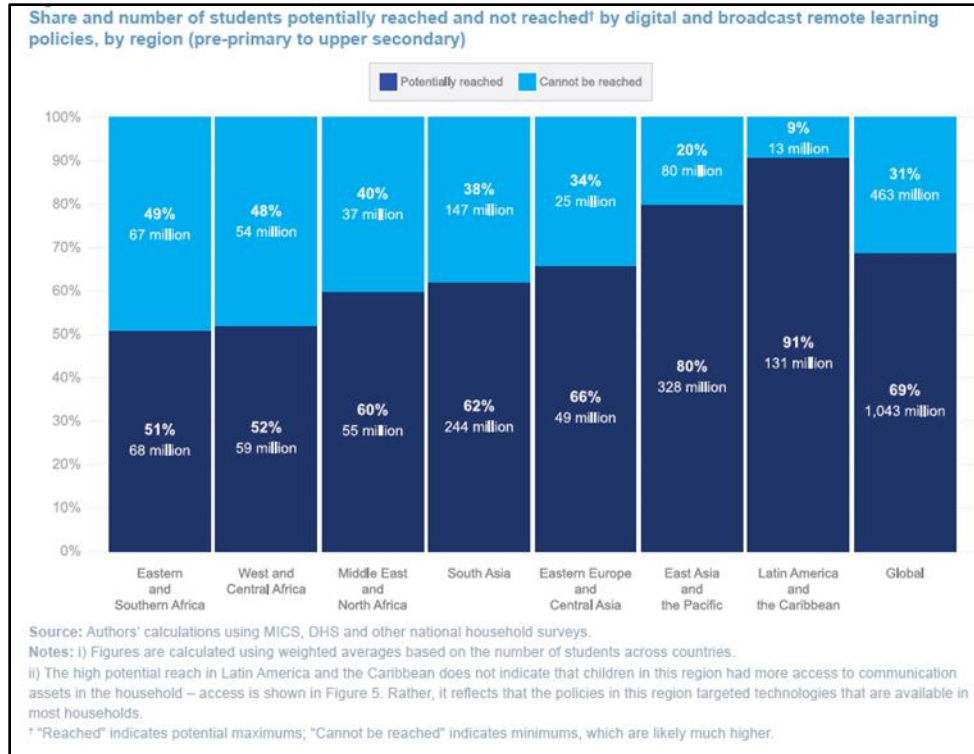
<sup>15</sup> <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/03/1088392>

<sup>16</sup> UNICEF, COVID-19: ARE CHILDREN ABLE TO CONTINUE LEARNING DURING SCHOOL CLOSURES? A global analysis of the potential reach of remote learning policies using data from 100 countries, [https://data.unicef.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/COVID-19-Remote-Learning-Factsheet\\_English\\_2020.pdf](https://data.unicef.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/COVID-19-Remote-Learning-Factsheet_English_2020.pdf), August 2020.

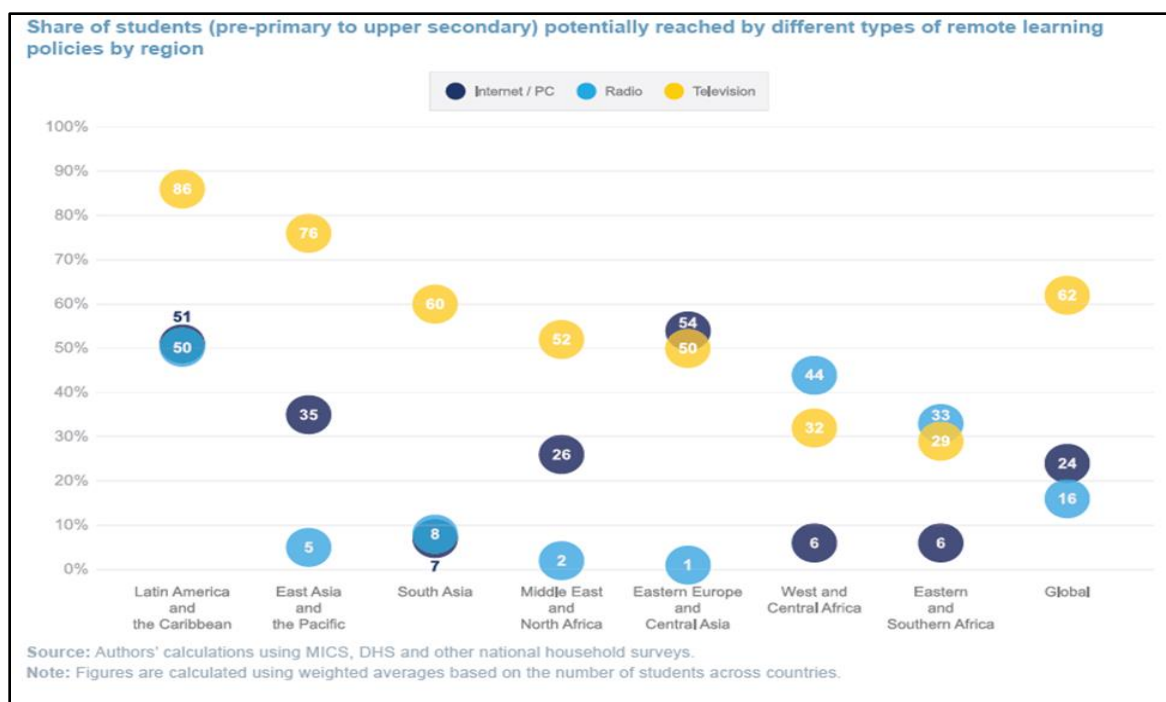
**Figure 2** below shows a further analysis of the data looking at **unreached groups of students** within countries broken down by demographics such as sex, wealth and geographical location. Across countries, regardless of overall country income, the largest percentages of unreached students were from rural areas (76 % globally), poor families (72% globally) and male (52% globally). Percentages broken down by country income reflected global averages and therefore show that the level of a country’s income does not insulate the most vulnerable sub-groups within any given society from the challenges surrounding remote learning.



**Figure 3** below shows the percentage of unreached students broken down by region. **Globally 31% (463 million) students cannot be reached by digital and broadcast remote learning policies.** The highest percentage of unreached students was recorded in Eastern and Southern Africa (49% or 67 million students) and the lowest percentage of unreached students was recorded in Latin America and the Caribbean (9% or 13 million students).



**Figure 4** below shows the share of students potentially reached by different types of remote learning broken down by region. Statistics did not include countries from the most-developed countries. Internet/PC use was highest in Eastern Europe and Central Asia (54%) and lowest in West and Central Africa and Eastern and Southern Africa (6%) with the Global average totaling 24%. Television was most widely used in Latin America and the Caribbean (86% of students) and least widely used in Eastern and Southern Africa (29% of students).



## Conduct of the Inquiry

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

- a. To assess the effectiveness of the hybrid learning system used by government and government-assisted schools in curriculum delivery.
- b. To compare and contrast student performance using traditional versus hybrid learning systems for similar time periods.
- c. To examine the systems and methods used to monitor and evaluate student performance in the hybrid learning environment.
- d. To assess the readiness of the hybrid learning system to adequately prepare students for external examinations.

3.1.20. Evidence gathering for this inquiry included four (4) public hearings held with the following governmental and non-government stakeholders on January 20, 2021, February 17, 2021, March 17, 2021 and April 21, 2021.

**Wednesday, January 20, 2021**

- Ministry of Education
- Trinidad and Tobago Unified Teachers Association (TTUTA)
- Association of Principals of Public Secondary Schools of Trinidad and Tobago (APPSSTI)
- National Primary Schools Principals Association (NAPSPA)

**Wednesday February 17, 2021**

- Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha (SDMS) Board of Education
- Arya Pratinidhi Sabha of Trinidad and Tobago
- Presbyterian Primary Schools' Board of Education;
- Baptist Board of Management
- St. Joseph Cluny Board of Education
- Anjuman Sunnat ul Jamaat Association (ASJA) Board of Education
- Anglican Board of Education
- Presbyterian Secondary Schools' Board of Education

**Wednesday, March 17, 2021**

- Ministry of Educaiton
- Division of Education, Innovation and Energy, Tobago House of Assembly
- Private Special Schools Association
- Support Autism Trinidad and Tobago (SATT)
- Down Syndrome Family Network (DSFN)
- Trinidad and Tobago Blind Welfare Association
- Association of Administrators of Public Special Schools in Trinidad and Tobago (AAPSSTI)
- Consortium of Disability Organisations (CODO)
- Audrey Jeffers School for the Deaf
- Princess Elizabeth Special School
- Cascade School for the Deaf

**Wednesday April 21, 2021**

- Ministry of Public Administration and Digital Transformation (MPADT)
- Telecommunication Services of Trinidad and Tobago (TSTT)
- Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago (TATT)
- Flow (Columbus Communications)
- Digicel

3.1.21. Subsequent to these public hearings, additional information was requested from specific stakeholders and was submitted accordingly.

3.1.22. Oral and written submissions received from the entities appearing before the Committee provided a frame of reference for the Committee's deliberations on the subject inquiry.

3.1.23. The **Minutes of the Meetings** during which the public hearings were held are attached as **Appendix II** and the **Verbatim Notes** as **Appendix III**.



## KEY ISSUES, FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### OBJECTIVE 1: To assess the effectiveness of the hybrid/blended learning system used by government and government-assisted schools in curriculum delivery.

#### Unpredictable Nature of the COVID-19 pandemic

- 4.1.1. The unpredictable nature of the COVID-19 pandemic created difficulties with regard to the MOE making concrete plans for the re-opening of schools. While the original intent of the Ministry of Education was to implement a hybrid system for the 2020/2021 School year, the number of COVID-19 cases did not permit face-to-face learning en masse.
- 4.1.2. There was a limited hybrid system implemented in February 2021 whereby Secondary School students in forms 4-6 returned for face-to-face learning only for classes requiring face to face instructions such as labs, practical assignments and Internal Assessments

#### Access to Devices and Connectivity

- 4.1.3. One of the major challenges faced with curriculum delivery has been limited access to devices and internet connectivity. As of February 2021, the Ministry of Education indicated that there were approximately 65,978 students without devices to pursue online learning<sup>17</sup>. This figure is disaggregated in Table 2 below.

TABLE 2 STUDENT ACCESS TO ICT DEVICES AND INTERNET CONNECTIVITY SURVEY PRELIMINARY RESULTS

STUDENT'S OPTIONS	NUMBER OF RESPONSES
Student has ICT device but NO Internet service	2,609
Student has internet service but NO ICT device	39,733
Student has NO ICT device and NO Internet service	23,636
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>65,978</b>

<sup>17</sup> Ministry of Education's written response to Senate Question No. 145

- 4.1.4. In a Public Hearing held on Wednesday February 17, 2021, the Committee learnt that while there were households where students were in possession of devices, they did not have internet connectivity often due to families not being able to afford internet service fees.
- 4.1.5. From the internet service providers, TSTT, Digicel and Flow, the Committee learnt that there was an average of approximately 84% uptake of internet services offered. This was lower than the approximately 95% coverage provided. This differential between coverage and accessibility of these services was, in large part due to citizens not being able to pay for internet service. Please see **Appendix IV** with maps detailing internet coverage.
- 4.1.6. The internet service providers also noted that connectivity was also interrupted by power outages and damaged cables.
- 4.1.7. There was wide variability with regards to the percentage of students with access to devices at schools run by the denominational boards. Denominational School Boards reported that as at February 17, 2021, the percentage of students registered with Denominational Schools without devices was as follows:
- SDMS: 30%
  - Presbyterian Primary Schools: 13%
  - Arya Pratinidhi: 15%
  - Baptist Board of Management Schools: 25%
  - ASJA: less than 10%
  - Anglican Board of Education Schools: 25-30%
- 4.1.8. Students who have been connecting to the internet for school use a variety of devices including smartphones, laptops and tablets. However, tablets and smart phones do not provide the same level of functionality as laptops.

#### **Distribution of Electronic Devices to Students**

- 4.1.9. The MOE entered into a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago (TATT) to provide 10,000 devices to students.

- 4.1.10. The Ministry of Education also engaged the Private Sector to donate devices through the Adopt-a-School Programme.
- 4.1.11. The criteria for the distribution of the devices procured by the MOE and through the Adopt-a-School programme were as follows:
- a. Students of examination classes (SEA, CSEC, CAPE) were given first priority; and
  - b. A means test implemented in April 2021 will determine the distribution of the remaining devices. Applications closed on May 15, 2021.

## **Alternative Arrangements for Students without access to devices and/or internet connectivity**

### ***Printed Packages***

- 4.1.12. In an effort to reach students without devices, the MOE developed a system of printed packages with assignments for parents to collect from schools, which students would complete at home and return.
- 4.1.13. The Committee learnt that several primary schools were without photocopy machines or did not have the funding to maintain the machines. As such, these schools were not able to print packages for students without devices.
- 4.1.14. Some parents were unable to collect packages during the stipulated hours. As such, at some schools, hundreds of packages were left uncollected.
- 4.1.15. Additionally, there was also the issue of parents who collected packages but did not return the packages within the stipulated time period which puts a burden on the teacher who has to check the late submissions as well as the new submissions submitted by the students.
- 4.1.16. Of the packages that are returned, teachers are not always able to determine whether the student completed the work on their own.

### ***The dissemination of educational content via Media Houses***

- 4.1.17. The MOE has collaborated with various media houses to create and or disseminate educational content for students. However, the Ministry has not analysed the number of students who access the educational content provided via TTT, Trinidad Guardian and 91.1 FM Talk City.
- 4.1.18. Students who are unable to access educational resources due to their socio-economic situation were referred to the Student Support Services Division.
- 4.1.19. The MOE also collaborated with the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services (MSDFS) on the development of the Means Test for the distribution of devices and the distribution of hampers to students in need.

### **Challenges of Students/Parents with online/remote learning**

- 4.1.20. Some Secondary School students were absent on account of having dropped out of school and were working to support their families. APPSSTT estimated that in some districts 10-12% of students are currently working.
- 4.1.21. Some of the other reasons for student absence from the online learning environment included:
- a. Parents who work are unable to supervise their children; and
  - b. Parents not having the resources to help their children.

### **Considerations Specific to Special Needs Students**

- 4.1.22. The Student Support Services Division (SSSD) of the MOE has been engaging special needs students via telephone and online platforms and has also provided guideline videos to parents and teachers for these special needs students.
- 4.1.23. The Committee noted with concern that the SSSD, a major stakeholder in the hybrid learning system, was only twenty percent (20%) staffed.
- 4.1.24. Some special needs students require tactile support, which is not possible in the online environment. Some parents of Special Needs students are not trained to meet the educational needs of their children.
- 4.1.25. The prolonged use of on-line modalities by special needs students have resulted in increased emotional outbursts, seizures and depression due to lack of social interaction.
- 4.1.26. In contrast to their mainstream counterparts, some special needs students have responded better to using the printed packages than using the online learning.
- 4.1.27. There have been challenges with Special Needs students being assigned Teacher's Aides. The Committee learnt that the contract of several Teacher's Aides were not renewed, leaving at least one category of students, that is, Autistic students, without this vital support service.
- 4.1.28. 20% of children registered with the Down Syndrome Family Network and a significant majority of children registered with Support Autism were not enrolled in any educational institution.
- 4.1.29. Tablets and smartphones are not ideal for Deaf Students as the screen is small and students need to be able to see the hands and mouth of the person presenting in order to be able to communicate.

4.1.30. In contrast to their mainstream counterparts, some special needs students have responded better to using the printed packages than using the online learning tools.

## **Findings**

4.1.31. Based on the preceding evidence, the Committee's findings are as follows:

- i. The hybrid/blended learning environment has had mixed levels of effectiveness across the school system with students from the lower-socio-economic bracket, low-performing students and special needs students being at a significant disadvantage.
- ii. The disparity in access to devices and connectivity has highlighted the widening Digital Divide in Trinidad and Tobago. Without devices and connectivity being made available to all students, the virtual learning environment is not accessible to the most vulnerable students.
- iii. The system for collection and return of packages has been plagued by challenges which has diminished its efficacy;
- iv. Most stakeholders reported that printed packages were ineffective for teaching and learning. However, the packages were found to be somewhat effective in reinforcing material previously taught.
- v. Though several special needs institutions received devices for their students, these devices were not equipped with the assistive technologies required to meet their unique needs.
- vi. Mixed attitudes towards education in some households contributes to poor outcomes among some students. These attitudes may be more pervasive in low-income households where prioritising educational attainment over meeting basic household needs may not be practical.
- vii. Insufficient research has been conducted to ensure that curriculum delivery strategies are data-driven.
- viii. The online learning environment has provided an opportunity for students and their caregivers to become more computer literate.
- ix. Secondary School students adapted to the online learning environment more readily than Primary School students. Collaboration between the Ministry of Education and the Private Sector has been effective in securing devices and connectivity for students.

- x. The hybrid/blended system has intensified the need for students to access the Student Support Division for both educational support and psycho-social support.
- xi. There needs to be a restructuring of the SSSD to function more effectively. Limited staffing and resources have significantly hindered the Division's ability to provide its clients with a consistent and reliable service. functions.

## ***Recommendations***

In light of the foregoing, the Committee recommends the following:

- A. The Support system for Special Needs students to be strengthened via greater collaboration among stakeholders to improve educational outcomes for Special Needs students. This can be done in the form of a multi-sectoral taskforce charged with the responsibility of ensuring that a greater percentage of Special Needs students are in receipt of educational support.**
- B. The Ministry of Education needs to develop targeted intervention strategies for vulnerable students, namely those with special needs, unidentified learning disabilities, low-performing students and students from low-income families.**
- C. The Ministry of Education in conjunction with the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs needs to address legislative deficiencies with regard to enrolment of Special Needs Students in mainstream education as there have been challenges with interpreting the Education Act Chap 39:01, which has led to subjective interpretations.**
- D. As part of this Ministerial Response, the Ministry of Education should provide an update on the Inclusive Education Project and adaptations required to facilitate Special Needs Students in a hybrid/blended learning environment. The Ministry needs to reconcile and streamline official 'inclusive education 'policy with 'special schools' and adequate specialist educators and support systems in the mainstream education environments.**
- E. The Ministry of Education, in collaboration with the Ministry of Public Administration and Digital Transformation and the Internet Service Providers should conduct a feasibility study on the use of itinerant mobile hotspots to provide internet access in communities without connectivity.**

- F. The Ministry of Education should conduct an analysis on the effectiveness on the types of devices used by students. For example, the Ministry could look at how the use of smartphones and tablets versus laptops and desktops affect curriculum delivery.
- G. For vulnerable students that still rely on the printed packages, the MOE could consider partnering with TTPOST and private courier companies to distribute packages to student homes on a regular schedule. This project can commence with a pilot initiative in one densely populated educational district.
- H. The Ministry of Education in collaboration with stakeholders serving Special Needs students should conduct a gap analysis on the assistive technologies required by Special Needs students.
- I. The Ministry of Education should develop a communication and outreach strategy to emphasise the importance of education to parents and guardians.
- J. Viewership of the Ministry's programmes on TTT Live and other channels needs to be measured and evaluated for effectiveness.
- K. The Ministry of Education should conduct research on the school dropout rate at both primary and secondary levels and develop targeted interventions based on these findings. This study should be commenced by the end of the third quarter of 2021.
- L. The Ministry of Education should use findings from research conducted on the hybrid/blended educational system to inform adjustments to the National Curriculum as it relates to both using ICTs in Education Delivery and equipping students for the knowledge-based economy.
- M. The Ministry of Education should consider assigning more guidance counsellors and social workers to school districts. This deployment should be based on a needs assessment and analysis. More emphasis should be places on identification of emotional/behavioural issues and remediation.
- N. The MOE should create an adapted curriculum to include application of information technology skills across disciplines.
- O. The MOE in Collaboration with the MPADT should develop satellite schools using community centres, religious institutions and other community-based spaces that can

**facilitate adequate social distancing/ where students and parents can access learning resources.**

- P. The MOE shall give an update on the man power of the SSSD and include the following:**
- i. The breakdown of number of persons assigned to the Division by portfolio;**
  - ii. The number of persons assigned between January 2021 and July, 2021 (include portfolios);**
  - iii. The vacancies of the SSSD as at July 2021.**



## **OBJECTIVE 2: To compare and contrast student performance using traditional versus hybrid/blended learning systems for similar time periods.**

### **Remedial Assistance**

- 5.1.1. The MOE provided the following assistance to teachers whose students were in need of remedial work:
- a) Advised teachers on how diagnostic assessments should be conducted;
  - b) Provided advice and assistance on interpreting and teaching the curriculum;
  - c) Provided resources to teachers and schools and was available to communicate with teachers on the curriculum via online, phone and email; and advised teachers on assisting students who may have problems with literacy.

### **Underperforming students and schools**

- 5.1.2. The MOE indicated that an adapted curriculum was utilised in schools which received a significant number of students in the Form One level who performed under 30% in the SEA examinations;
- 5.1.3. There were 56 secondary schools utilising the adapted curriculum.

### **Variables affecting Student Performance within the Traditional Learning Systems and Hybrid Learning Systems**

- 5.1.4. The MOE provided the following variables which affect the performance of students within the Traditional Learning Systems and Hybrid Learning Systems.
- a) prior knowledge;
  - b) language;
  - c) cultural background;
  - d) rate of learning;
  - e) amount of instructional time;
  - f) interests and attitudes;
  - g) student supervision;
  - h) socio-economic status; and
  - i) accessibility to school services.
- 5.1.5. The MOE further explained that regardless of the learning environment, prior knowledge, language capability and rate of learning will have the same impact. However, screen time, as

compared to face-to-face instruction, is reduced to compensate for the asynchronous component of remote learning. Those students who demonstrate a high interest in schoolwork and have the right attitude toward education are likely to be just as engaged in synchronous and asynchronous teaching<sup>18</sup> and learning vis-à-vis face-to-face instruction. On the other hand, those students who show little or no interest in schoolwork and have not inculcated the right attitude toward education may progress at a slower pace as compared with face-to-face instruction.

- 5.1.6. Additionally, students of parents of low socio-economic status will most likely be impacted negatively as they may be unable:
- a) to afford to hire persons to supervise their children while at home;
  - b) to provide a dedicated ‘learning space’ in the home for virtual classes and completion of assignments; and
  - c) to supply the necessary tools to engage in remote learning e.g. tablet, laptop, headsets, printer, storage device for each child in the home and also internet connectivity.
- 5.1.7. Families that can be classified as having a high level of ‘cultural capital’, that is, having a tradition of high academic achievements along with the financial ability to provide all the resources necessary to engage in remote learning may not be negatively impacted by remote learning systems in any way perceivable.

## ***Findings***

- 5.1.8. Based on the preceding evidence, the Committee’s findings are as follows:
- i. Students who were under-performing in the traditional system are most disadvantaged by the online learning environment. Additional support is therefore needed for these students.
  - ii. There has been insufficient data collection and analysis to compare student performance in the traditional vs. hybrid/blended learning environment.

## ***Recommendations***

In light of the foregoing, the Committee recommends the following:

- A. The Ministry of Education in collaboration with the various school boards should develop a targeted intervention plan for under-performing students to receive remedial tutoring.**

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<sup>18</sup> Synchronous learning is online or distance education that happens in real time, often with a set class schedule and required login times. Asynchronous learning does not require real-time interaction; instead, content is available online for students to access when it best suits their schedules, and assignments are completed to deadlines

**Types of tutoring support programmes could include peer tutoring as well as harnessing the networks of past student associations to recruit alumni volunteer tutors.**

- B. The Ministry of Education should strengthen initiatives to train parents of vulnerable students on how to effectively use digital learning platforms. This solution may involve creating video tutorials that can be viewed on demand.**
- C. As part of its Ministerial Response to this Report, the Ministry of Education should indicate and share any research conducted to compare student performance in the traditional learning system with student performance in the hybrid/blended learning system.**

### **OBJECTIVE 3: To examine the systems and methods used to monitor and evaluate student performance in the hybrid/blended learning environment.**

#### **Assessment of Student Performance/ Participation**

- 6.1.1. The MOE has encouraged teachers to focus on project-based assessments for online and remote classes.
- 6.1.2. The MOE's standardised assessment was restricted to certification and placement classes while examinations such as the National Test and National Certificate of Secondary Education (NCSE) were used for monitoring the performance of students.
- 6.1.3. The software needed to monitor and assess students is costly, as such teachers and principals have been using moral suasion to encourage honesty in the assessment process.
- 6.1.4. The MOE indicated in its written submission dated December 2020, that students are assessed in the hybrid learning environment using the following methods:
- a) Diagnostic assessments;
  - b) Formative assessments;
  - c) Continuous assessments;
  - d) Summative assessments;
  - e) Worksheets;
  - f) Open book assignments; and
  - g) Online interactive tests with real-time responses to provide evaluations.
- 6.1.5. The Ministry of Educated added that assessments may be norm-referenced for ranking students or criterion-referenced for assessing skills' development according to criteria. Criterion-referenced assessments would require teachers to develop rubrics which remove the bias in judging a students' product since students with devices would have more access to information on the world-wide-web than students with limited access to print materials. This follows from teachers' practice re: differentiated instruction and accommodations (adaptations and modifications) to facilitate the students' needs. Teachers can promote equity to varying degrees based on the tools they themselves can access, e.g. concrete manipulatives for Mathematics, consumables for teacher made interactive instructional aids, etc.

- 6.1.6. Each student is **evaluated based on the learning activities they were engaged** in e.g. online students assessed on what they covered while students with packages or WhatsApp assessed on what they covered.
- 6.1.7. The Committee concurs with the MoE’s assessment of the pros and cons of the hybrid/blended learning environment versus traditional learning environment. This dichotomy is illustrated below.

<b>Hybrid/Blended Learning Environment</b>	<b>Traditional Learning Environment</b>
Hybrid learning systems allow for face-to-face engagement with students as well as synchronous and asynchronous teaching and learning. However, for synchronous teaching and learning there is the absence of non-verbal cues once the student’s camera is turned off.	The face-to-face interaction also allows for student interaction/class dynamic that can provide a wealth of information to educators that are absent with remote learning. As such, the teacher is able to observe the students in a physical environment and glean the level of student understanding of topics taught.
Unless schools have set up ‘online office hours’ for students’ further interaction between student and teacher may end after synchronous classes. However, if asynchronous discussions are specifically geared to acquire information that allows teachers to evaluate student learning. Teachers may have utilised WhatsApp messaging in order to provide ‘online office hours’ to students.	In a school setting, students have access to teachers outside of the timetabled period and so teachers can further interrogate student acquisition of content taught during classroom sessions.
There is very little opportunity to monitor students who receive packages, but can evaluate work that was returned to schools for marking.	Teachers are able to recognize socio-economic and pycho-social issues faster under the ‘Traditional Learning Environment.
Once the camera is turned off and students do not participate in class sessions then the teacher is none-the-wiser about whether or not the student is engaged in the classroom activities.	

Hybrid/Blended Learning Environment	Traditional Learning Environment
<p>Online learning as well as the distribution of printed packages allow students to engage in learning even if they are ill, which is an advantage over face-to-face learning. Further, if sessions are recorded then students can review classes whether they were present or absent during synchronous classes.</p>	

### Training and Support for Teachers

6.1.8. The Committee learnt that the MOE conducted training for teachers in remote learning in collaboration with international organisations such as Commonwealth of Learning (COL) and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). The Curriculum Officers in their various subject areas were able to accomplish the following:

- a) establish protocols for submission of student content (subject activity) for upload to the MOE’s School Learning and Management System (SLMS);
- b) developed the activities for upload to the SMLS. By June 2020 five hundred and seventy (570) subject activity sheets were developed for the SLMS and ten (10) Mathematics and ten (10) English videos were published on the online platform;
- c) review of Math YouTube videos and related worksheets (Open Sec an online forum);
- d) reviewed online materials submitted by National Library Services (NALIS). To date forty-six (46) sites for Social Sciences, twenty (20) English sites and several Mathematics sites were reviewed for use by teachers;
- e) CSEC IT, CAPE IT, CAPE Computer Science students with devices were able to continue working on their School Based Assessments (SBAs) with support from teachers via email, WhatsApp. Teachers in other subjects continued instructing students remotely during the closure of schools utilising the aforementioned online platforms/tools.

### Considerations for Special Needs Students

6.1.9. The SSSD hotline receives an average of 15 calls per day regarding assistance for special needs students.

- 6.1.10. In addition to the 5 behavioural specialists, 9 clinical psychologists and 9 school psychologists employed by SSSD, the division has also outsourced additional psycho-educational assessment services.
- 6.1.11. Authentic and performance-based assessments via videos, e-journals and worksheets are used to assess special needs students.
- 6.1.12. There are several children within the Network with Down syndrome who are awaiting assessments and teachers' aides.
- 6.1.13. Summative and project-based assessments have been used to assess special needs students

## ***Findings***

6.1.14. Based on the preceding evidence, the Committee's findings are as follows:

- i. There was a reasonable amount of evidence to infer that Teachers have attempted to create adapted student assessments to the online learning environment. However, there has not been a process to standardise online assessments. Undoubtedly the dichotomy between students with full access to the e-learning environment and students without online access has contributed to the difficulty of standardising assessment techniques.
- ii. The integrity of the assessment process has been compromised by lack of standardized systems to accurately verify whether students have completed assessments on their own.
- iii. The significant challenges encountered by special needs students in participating in the online learning has made it impractical to effectively assess the performance of this category of students.
- iv. In Response to the inherent challenges of an online learning environment, it was evident that some educators have shifted to a more project-based assessment and individual assessments. This has allowed for increased creativity in the assessment process and greater accommodation of different learning styles.

## ***Recommendations***

In light of the foregoing, the Committee recommends the following:

- A. The Ministry of Education should conduct an evaluation of the assessment tools and strategies used by teachers during the pandemic. The results should be used to develop an assessment policy for the online learning environment inclusive of rubrics.**
- B. The Ministry of Education should develop an honour code system. As part of this system, both parents/guardians and students should sign an agreement to uphold the integrity of the assessment process.**
- C. Given the additional expense to procure software used to monitor and assess students, the MOE could consider collaborating with the Ministry of Public Administration and Digital Transformation and Private Sector Information Technology professionals to develop monitoring and evaluation software suitable to the local education environment.**
- D. The Ministry of Education in collaboration with Special Education stakeholders should develop policies and guides for assessing the performance of Special Needs students in the Online Learning Environment.**
- E. The Ministry of Education needs to ensure that Teacher's Aides are assigned to a greater number of students who require this type of support. Given existing resource constraints confronting the Ministry, the deployment of these Aids can be done following a standardised needs assessment of students.**
- F. MOE needs to ensure teachers have hardware (computers/tablets) and maintenance needed to execute in the hybrid system. Teachers also need subvention for Wi-Fi access to be able to carry out their duties in the hybrid learning environment.**



## **OBJECTIVE 4: To assess the readiness of the hybrid/blended learning system to adequately prepare students for external examinations**

### **Preparing Students for Laboratory Based and Practical Examinations**

- 7.1.1. The Committee learnt that in some subjects, such as Agricultural Science, Food & Nutrition & Clothing and Textiles, where parental supervision is possible, some reduced practical assignments were advised. For example, hand stitching or recycling of garments through dyeing is possible; reduced crop growing; baking of cakes; breads and such simple food products can be attempted. Also, for CSEC Electrical Technology, sample projects using battery operated parts with instructional worksheets were developed to guide the teachers in developing similar projects to continue practical assignments remotely. The MOE ensured that all teachers were advised to seek parental permission prior to implementing these strategies.
- 7.1.2. The MOE added that for the science subjects, virtual lab applications can be used to assist students in developing experimental skills such as drawing, observation, recording, reporting, interpreting, planning and design. With respect to Physical Education and Sport, teachers were encouraged to teach the theoretical components associated with the practical sporting options, such as skills, tactics, rules/laws/events remotely.

### **Examinations**

- 7.1.3. The MOE stated that it continues to negotiate with the Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC) to treat with the learning challenges faced by students especially given that it is anticipated that these challenges will be exacerbated during the 2021 examinations.
- 7.1.4. The MOE advised that it has not received official feedback from CXC with regards to the Council's decision on how it intends to treat with the educational issues faced by students at a regional level.
- 7.1.5. The MOE indicated that it has changed the format for the 2021 SEA examinations; reduced the number of questions and indicated to teachers the format for the Creative Writing question.

7.1.6. The Committee noted that a Revised Assessment Framework was developed for the 2021-2023 SEA Examinations. There was a reduction in the number of items on the Mathematics Paper from 45 to 40 whereas in the English Language Arts, there was a reduction from 43 to 36 items.

7.1.7. Additionally, the number of objectives were reduced for the Mathematics Assessment and these were indicated in the framework document. The type of writing was also revealed for the 2021 examination. Narrative Writing will be assessed. The previously held times for each subject area has been maintained: English Language Arts Writing (50 minutes), Mathematics (75 minutes) and English Language Arts (75 minutes).

#### **Student performance in SEA 2020 compared to SEA 2019:**

7.1.8. There was a 2% reduction in the success rate for Mathematics and a 9% reduction in Language Arts scores.

7.1.9. The Ministry submitted that the decline in the Mathematics scores is a reflection of worldwide trends as this subject requires a more hands on approach to teaching.

#### **Transition to Hybrid Learning in Upper Forms:**

7.1.10. Most Denominational Boards reported that the transition to hybrid learning in the upper forms has been successful.

7.1.11. Schools have adjusted their timetables so that online learning does not clash with face-to-face learning.

7.1.12. Stakeholders highlighted that the suspension of face-to-face examinations has prevented upper form students from engaging in practice examinations in a class room setting. There was concern about the potential psychological impact of this inconsistency given that the CXC examinations are expected to be administered under class room type conditions.

### ***Findings***

7.1.13. Based on the preceding evidence, the Committee's findings are as follows:

- i. The 2020 CXC results were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, there is limited empirical evidence to state how the pandemic affected student performance.

- ii. Limited empirical data on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been gathered on the impact of the COVID -19 pandemic on SEA preparation and results.
- iii. The deficiency in the student assessment mechanism is a significant problem as assessments plays an important role in the process of learning and motivation.
- iv. The MOE collaborated with international organisations to provide training to teachers in remote learning.

### ***Recommendations***

In light of the foregoing, the Committee recommends the following:

- A. The MOE should conduct research on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on both preparations for CSEC and CAPE examinations and the results.**
- B. The MoE should collaborate with its regional counterparts to request that CXC consider the various variables and conditions generated that the pandemic which are adversely impacting the preparation of Secondary school students for the high-stake examinations of CSEC and CAPE.**

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

Mr. Paul Richards  
**Chairman**

Mr. Esmond Forde, MP  
**Vice-Chairman**

Mr. Avinash Singh, MP  
**Member**

Mr. David Nakhid  
**Member**

Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh, MP  
**Member**

Mr. Roger Munroe, MP  
**Member**

Ms. Penelope Beckles, MP  
**Member**

Mr. Rohan Sinanan, MP  
**Member**

**June 28, 2021**

# APPENDICES

## Appendix I - Persons who appeared and provided oral evidence

Name of Official	Portfolio	Organization
<b>Public Hearing Held on January 20, 2021</b>		
<b>Mrs. Lisa Henry-David</b>	Chief Education Officer (Ag.)	Ministry of Education
<b>Ms. Anna Singh</b>	Director, Curriculum Planning and Development Division	
<b>Mrs. Kamini Bhagaloo</b>	Assistant Director, Division of Education Research and Evaluation	
<b>Mrs. Antonia Tekah-De Freitas</b>	President	Trinidad and Tobago Unified Teachers Association
<b>Mr. Bradon Roberts</b>	Tobago Officer	
<b>Mrs. Lisa Ibrahim-Joseph</b>	Education & Research Officer	
<b>Mrs. Sherra Carrington-James</b>	President	Association of Principals of Public Secondary Schools of Trinidad and Tobago
<b>Ms. Patricia Pitt</b>	Secretary	
<b>Mr. Lance Mottley</b>	President	National Primary Schools Principals Association
<b>Ms. Paula Kalkman</b>	1st Vice President	

Name of Official	Portfolio	Organization
<b>Public Hearing Held on February 17, 2021</b>		
<b>Mr. Jeewan Ramdhanie</b>	Assistant Secretary	Sanatan Dharma Maha Saba Board of Education
<b>Mr. Ravi Rambarran</b>	Secretary	Arya Pratinidhi Saba of Trinidad and Tobago
<b>Ms. Geeta K. Maharajh</b>	General Secretary	Presbyterian Primary Schools' Board of Education
<b>Mr. Michael Hills-Wilson</b>	Secretary	Baptist Board of Management
<b>Ms. Debra East</b>	Principal (Secretary) Ag.	St. Joseph Cluny Board of Education
<b>Mr. Rahimool Hosein</b>	General Secretary	ASJA Board of Education
<b>Mrs. Avion Alexander-Titus</b>	Member (Representative of the Anglican Teachers Association)	Anglican Board of Education
<b>Mr. Joel Bajnath</b>	General Secretary	Presbyterian Secondary Schools' Board of Education
<b>Public Hearing Held on March 18, 2021</b>		
<b>Mrs. Lenor Baptiste-Simmons</b>	Permanent Secretary	Ministry of Education
<b>Ms. Mary Bastien</b>	Coordinator, Guidance and Counselling	
<b>Mrs. Leticia Rodriguez-Cupid</b>	Coordinator, Special Education	

Name of Official	Portfolio	Organization
<b>Public Hearing Held on March 18, 2021 (cont'd)</b>		
<b>Mrs. Sherry-Ann Rollocks-Hackett</b>  <b>Mrs. Nadine John-St. Rose</b>	Schools Supervisor III  Curriculum Coordinator	Tobago House of Assembly: Division of Education, Innovation and Energy
<b>Ms. Phillis Griffith</b>  <b>Dr. Shara Zoe</b>	President  Ordinary Member	Private Special Schools Association
<b>Dr. Radica Mahase</b>	Director/Founder	Support Autism Trinidad and Tobago (SATT)
<b>Ms. Lisa J. Ghany</b>	Honorary Board Member	Down Syndrome Family Network
<b>Mr. Kenneth Suratt</b>	Executive Officer	Trinidad and Tobago Blind Welfare Association
<b>Mr. Derrick Mundy</b>	President	Association of Administrators of Public Special Schools Trinidad and Tobago
<b>Ms. Jacqueline Leotaud</b>	President	Consortium of Disability Organizations (CODO)
<b>Ms. Veronica John</b>	Principal	Audrey Jeffers School for the Deaf
<b>Mr. Gerard Frederick</b>	Principal	Princes Elizabeth Special School
<b>Ms. Francisca Monsegue</b>	Principal (Ag.)	Cascade School for the Deaf

Name of Official	Portfolio	Organization
<b>Public Hearing Held on April 21, 2021</b>		
<b>Mr. Claudelle McKellar</b>  <b>Mr. Charles Bobb-Semple,</b>	Permaenent Secretary (Ag)  Head, National Information and Communication Technology Division	Ministry of Public Administration and Digital Transformation
<b>Ms. Cynthia Reddock-Downes</b>  <b>Mr. Kirk Sookram</b>	Chief Executive Officer  Deputy Chief Executive Officer	Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago (TAAT)
<b>Ms. Lisa Agard</b>  <b>Mr. Kenrick Garcia</b>	Chief Executive Officer (Ag.)  Chief Technology Officer (Ag.)	Telecommunication Services of Trinidad and Tobago (TSTT & Bmobile)
<b>Abraham Smith</b>  <b>Chandrika Samaroo</b>	Chief Executive Officer  Operations Director	Digicel Trinidad and Tobago
<b>Mr. Kurleigh Prescod</b>  <b>Ms. Cindy-Ann Gatt</b>	Country Manager  Commercial Director	Columbus Communications Trinidad Limited (FLOW)



## Appendix II – Minutes of Meetings

**MINUTES OF THE THIRD MEETING OF THE JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE OF  
PARLIAMENT ON SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION,  
HELD ON WEDNESDAY JANUARY 20, 2021**

**This meeting was facilitated via the Zoom video conferencing program**

### **PRESENT**

#### **Members of the Committee**

Mr. Paul Richards	Chairman
Mr. Roger Monroe, MP	Vice-Chairman
Mr. Esmond Forde, MP	Member
Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh, MP	Member
Mr. David Nakhid	Member
Mr. Avinash Singh	Member

### **ABSENT/EXCUSED**

Mr. Rohan Sinanan	Member
Ms. Penelope Beckles, MP	Member

#### **Secretariat**

Mr. Julien Ogilvie	Secretary
Mr. Brian Lucio	Assistant Secretary
Ms. Aaneesa Baksh	Researcher
Ms. Nicole Brown	Researcher

### **CALL TO ORDER**

- 1.1 The Chairman called the meeting to order at 9:32 a.m. and welcomed members present.

### **ANNOUNCEMENTS**

- 2.1 The Chairman reminded Members that there was a change in membership whereby Mr. Avinash Singh was appointed to serve on the Committee in lieu of Ms. Allyson West.

**CONFIRMATION OF MINUTES OF THE SECOND MEETING HELD ON NOVEMBER 25, 2020.**

- 3.1 The Chairman invited Members to examine page-by-page, the Minutes of the Meeting held on November 25, 2020.
- 3.2 The Minutes were confirmed without amendments on a motion moved by Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh, MP and seconded by Mr. David Nakhid.

**MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES**

4.1 The Chairman highlighted the following matter:

- i. **Item 5.5, page 3** – the Secretariat circulated the *Revised Work Programme* for the comments of Members by email dated December 02, 2020. No comments were received.
- i. **Item 6.7, page 3** – the Secretariat sourced policy documents on Education, Culture and the Socially Displaced. Members were advised that the documents can be sourced in the Committee’s folder on the Rotunda e-repository.

**PRE-HEARING DISCUSSIONS RE: 1<sup>st</sup> Hearing on the effects of the hybrid learning system on student performance in government and government-assisted schools during the revised COVID-19 restrictions**

- 5.1 The Chairman indicate that later in the proceedings, the Committee will convene its 1<sup>st</sup> hearing with stakeholders pursuant to its *inquiry into the effects of the hybrid learning system on student performance in government and government-assisted schools during the revised COVID-19 restrictions*.
- 5.2 The Members were advised that officials of the following entities were expected to participate in the day’s hearing:
- i. Ministry of Education;
  - ii. Trinidad and Tobago Unified Teachers Association;
  - iii. Association of Principals of Public Secondary Schools of Trinidad and Tobago; and
  - iv. National Primary Schools Principals Association.
- 5.3 The Chairman confirmed that all Members were in receipt of the following documents:

- i. Written Submissions from the MoE, APPSSTT and NAPSPA (The Chairman indicated that TTUTA advised that the organisation would not be making a written submission);
  - ii. Issues Papers prepared by the Secretariat on the Written Submissions from Stakeholders; and
  - iii. Inquiry Proposal (final version) prepared by the Secretariat.
- 5.4 The Committee discussed the approach to be taken to examine the Officials during the hearing.

## **OTHER BUSINESS**

### **Proposed Date and Agenda for Next Meeting**

6.1 The Committee agreed to meet next on **Wednesday February 17, 2021** to commence *its 2<sup>nd</sup> public hearing on its inquiry into the effects of the hybrid learning system on student performance*

6.2 The Committee agreed to engage the following stakeholders during its inquiry:

- A. A sample of denominational Boards including but not limited to:
  - a) Catholic School Board of Education;
  - b) ASJA Board;
  - c) Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha Board;
  - d) Anglican Education Board of Management;
  - e) Trinidad Muslim League Inc. (TML) Islamic Board;
  - f) SWAHA Board;
  - g) Baptist Board;
  - h) Chinmaya Mission Vidyalaya;
  - i) Seventh-Day Adventist Board; and
  - j) Presbyterian School Boards of Education.
- B. Organisations representing children with disabilities, including but not limited to:
  - a) Down Syndrome Family Network;
  - b) Support Autism; and
  - c) Trinidad and Tobago Blind Welfare Association.
- C. The Tobago House of Assembly
  - a) Division of Education, Innovation and Energy (DEIE).

6.3 The Chairman advised Members that the Secretary issued a Call for Public Submissions with a deadline of January 20, 2021. Thus far two (2) public missions were received.

### **SUSPENSION**

7.1 The Chairman suspended the meeting at 10:06 a.m.

### **PUBLIC HEARING RE: 1<sup>st</sup> Hearing on the effects of the hybrid learning system on student performance in government and government-assisted schools during the revised COVID-19 restrictions**

8.1 The meeting resumed in public at 10:30 a.m.

8.2 The following persons joined the meeting:

#### **Ministry of Education**

- |                          |   |
|--------------------------|---|
| 1. Mrs. Lisa Henry-David | Chief Education Officer (Ag.)                                     |
| 2. Ms. Anna Singh        | Director, Curriculum Planning and Development Division            |
| 3. Mrs. Kamini Bhagaloo  | Assistant Director, Division of Education Research and Evaluation |

#### **Trinidad and Tobago Unified Teachers Association**

- |                                  |                              |
|----------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1. Mrs. Antonia Tekah-De Freitas | President                    |
| 2. Mr. Bradon Roberts            | Tobago Officer               |
| 3. Mrs. Lisa Ibrahim-Joseph      | Education & Research Officer |

#### **Association of Principals of Public Secondary Schools of Trinidad and Tobago**

- |                                 |           |
|---------------------------------|-----------|
| 1. Mrs. Sherra Carrington-James | President |
| 2. Ms. Patricia Pitt            | Secretary |

#### **National Primary Schools Principals Association**

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

### **Opening Statements**

8.3 The following chief officials gave brief opening remarks.

- i. Mrs. Lisa Henry-David - Chief Education Officer, MOE;
- ii. Mrs. Antonia Tekah-De Freitas – President, TTUTA
- iii. Mrs. Sherra Carrington-James – President, APPSSTT
- iv. Mr. Lance Mottley – President, NAPSPA

## **Key Issues Discussed**

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

The following are the main issues arising from discussions with the **Ministry of Education (MOE)**:

### **Distribution of Electronic Devices to Students**

- i. The MOE entered into a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago (TATT) to provide 10,000 devices to students;
- ii. The criteria for the distribution of the devices procured by the MOE and through the Adopt-a-School programme are as follows:
  - a. Students of examination classes (SEA, CSEC, CAPE) would have the first priority; and
  - b. A means test will determine the distribution of the devices in the second instance.
- iii. The means test will seek to evaluate the following in determining how devices should be distributed to students:
  - a. Number of children in the household;
  - b. Financial ability of the caregiver;
  - c. Number of devices in the household; and
  - d. Whether the household is in receipt of grants.
- iv. Funds are currently being prioritised for the purchase and distribution of devices rather than on acquiring software for student assessment and monitoring.

### **Challenges of students without access to internet or devices**

- v. The MOE has not received feedback on the number of students who access the educational content provided via TTT, Trinidad Guardian and 91.1FM Talk City.
- vi. Students who are unable to access educational resources due to their poor socio-economic situation were referred to the Student Support Services Division.
- vii. While the MOE collaborated with the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services (MSDFS) on the development of the Means Test for the distribution of devices and the distribution of hampers to students in need, the MOE agrees that closer collaboration with the MSDFS with regard to supporting students in poor socio-economic situations, was required.

### **Assessment of Student Performance/ Participation**

- viii. The MOE has encouraged teachers to focus on project-based assessments for online and remote classes.
- ix. The MOE's standardised assessment was restricted to certification and placement classes while examinations such as the National Test and National Certificate of Secondary Education (NCSE) were used for monitoring the performance of students.

- x. Guidelines were provided to the schools and teachers identifying areas in curriculum on which teachers should focus. Curriculum officers were available to lend assistance to teachers in adapting the curriculum to an online platform.
- xi. Student performance in SEA 2020 compared to SEA 2019:
  - a. There was a 2% reduction in the success rate for Mathematics and
  - b. A 9% reduction in Language Arts.
- xii. The decline in the Mathematics scores is a reflection of worldwide trends as this subject requires a more hands on approach to teaching.
- xiii. The MOE admitted that it would be difficult to credibly assess student performance based on the printed packages as, teachers are unsure if the exercises therein were completed independently by the student.
- xiv. MOE indicated that based on data collected in their ongoing survey with regard to class checks in secondary schools:
  - a. 50% did random class checks;
  - b. 32% did pre-arranged class checks;
  - c. 14% did a combination of random and pre-arranged class checks; and
  - d. 4% did not conduct class checks.

### **Remedial Assistance**

- xv. The MOE provided the following assistance to teachers whose students were in need of remedial work:
  - a. Advised teachers on how diagnostic assessments should be conducted;
  - b. Provided advice and assistance on interpreting and teaching the curriculum;
  - c. Provided resources to teachers and schools and was available to communicate with teachers on the curriculum via online, phone and email; and
  - d. Advised teachers on assisting students who may have problems with literacy.

### **Challenges of Special Needs Students**

- xvi. The Student Support Services Division (SSSD) of the MOE has been engaging special needs students via telephone and online platforms and has also provided guideline videos to parents and teachers for these special needs students;
- xvii. The MOE indicated that the SSSD hotline has received an average of 50 calls per day on varying issues;
- xviii. Some special needs students require tactile support, which is not possible in the online environment;
- xix. Some parents of Special Needs students are not trained to meet the educational needs of their students.

### **Copyright Issues**

- xx. With regard to the copyright restrictions on the material photocopied by teachers, the MOE have been providing copyright free resources for teachers and encouraged teachers to utilise open educational platforms.

### **Underperforming students and schools**

- xxi. The MOE indicated that an adapted curriculum is utilised in schools which received a significant number of students in the Form One level who performed under 30% in the SEA examinations;
- xxii. There are currently 56 secondary schools that are utilising the adapted curriculum.

### **Examinations**

- xxiii. The MOE stated that it continues to negotiate with the Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC) to treat with the learning challenges faced by students especially given that it is anticipated that these challenges will be exacerbated during the 2021 examinations;
- xxiv. The MOE advised that it has not received official feedback from CXC with regards the Council's decision on how it intends to treat with the educational issues faced by students at a regional level;
- xxv. The MOE indicated that it has changed the format for the 2021 SEA examinations; reduced the number of questions and indicated to teachers the format for the Creative Writing question.

The following are the main issues arising from discussions with the **Trinidad and Tobago Unified Teachers Association (TTUTA)**:

### **Assessment of Student/Teacher Performance/ Participation**

- i. There is a need to standardize rubrics for the assessment of students.
- ii. The use of timed assessments mitigates against parents assisting students with online assessments.
- iii. The software needed to monitor and assess students is costly, as such teachers and principals have been using moral suasion to encourage honesty in the assessment process.
- iv. The MOE has not collaborated with TTUTA on the framework for teacher assessment in the online environment and would like to see a more collaborative, rather than punitive approach to teacher assessment.
- v. The MOE needs to consider a macro approach to resilience planning by looking at the training and development of teachers and partnering with ministerial and non-ministerial stakeholders.

The following are the main issues arising from discussions with the **Association of Principals of Public Secondary Schools of Trinidad and Tobago (APPSSTT)**:

### **Challenges of Students/Parents with online/remote learning**

- i. Some Secondary School students are absent because they have started to 'dropped-out' of school and are working to support their families. APPSSTT estimates that in some districts 10-12% of students have withdrawn from the education system and are now working.

- ii. Beyond the distribution of devices, there must be a drive to reach out to parents on the importance of education as this is not a priority in some households.
- iii. Some families have devices and connections for internet service but are unable to afford to pay for access.
- iv. Some parents are unable to collect packages during the stipulated hours. As at some schools, hundreds of packages are left uncollected.
- v. Additionally, there is also the issue of parents who collect packages but do not return the packages within the stipulated time period which puts a burden on the teacher who has to check the late submissions as well as the new submissions submitted by the students.
- vi. Of the packages that are returned, teachers are not always able to determine whether the student completed the work on their own.
- vii. There must be a greater collaboration among stakeholders to improve educational outcomes for students.

The following are the main issues arising from discussions with the **National Primary Schools Principals Association (NAPSPA)**:

#### **Assessment of Student/Teacher Performance/ Participation**

- i. The difficulty faced by teachers to engage students who are utilising the printed packages.
- ii. Securing the participation of students at the primary school level in online or distance learning was more difficult as the students were not independent learners like those in the secondary schools.
- iii. Principals perform class checks for online line classes in the following ways:
  - c. Routine or random 'sit-ins' during a live classroom meeting;
  - d. Review the teacher assessment and feedback from students; and
  - e. Oral questions to students to determine how well the pupils are learning.

#### **Student Absence**

- iv. Some of the reasons for student absence from the online learning environment include:
  - a. Parents who work are unable to supervise their children;
  - b. Parents not having the resources to help their children.

#### **Recommendations to Ministry of Education**

- v. The NAPSPA suggested the following recommendation to the MOE:
  - a. Accelerate the plans for the distribution of devices and ensure that devices have connections to service providers as there are parents who are unable to afford internet services;
  - b. Collaborate with internet service providers to determine the areas which are outside their internet coverage areas and consider a solution to allow for these areas to be included in their coverage zones; and
  - c. Provide a timetable of the classes broadcast via, television and radio to schools so that they can be disseminated to teachers and students.



**Challenges of schools with printed packages**

- vi. Several primary schools are without photocopy machines or do not have the funding to maintain the machines. As such, these schools are not able to print packages for students without devices.

**ADJOURNMENT**

9.1 The meeting was adjourned accordingly at 12:51 p.m.

I certify that these Minutes are true and correct.

Chairman

Secretary

February 10, 2021

**MINUTES OF THE FOURTH MEETING OF THE JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE OF PARLIAMENT ON SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION, HELD ON WEDNESDAY FEBRUARY 17, 2021**

**This meeting was facilitated via the Zoom video conferencing program**

**PRESENT**

**Members of the Committee**

Mr. Paul Richards	Chairman
Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh, MP	Member
Mr. David Nakhid	Member
Ms. Pennelope Beckles, MP	Member
Mr. Avinash Singh	Member

**ABSENT/EXCUSED**

Mr. Roger Monroe, MP	Vice-Chairman
Mr. Esmond Forde, MP	Member
Mr. Rohan Sinanan	Member

**Secretariat**

Mr. Julien Ogilvie	Secretary
Mr. Brian Lucio	Assistant Secretary
Ms. Aaneesa Baksh	Researcher
Ms. Nicole Brown	Researcher

**CALL TO ORDER**

- 1.1 The Chairman called the meeting to order at 9:42 a.m. and welcomed members present.

**CONFIRMATION OF MINUTES OF THE THIRD MEETING HELD ON WEDNESDAY JANUARY 20, 2021**

- 2.1 The Chairman invited Members to examine page-by-page, the Minutes of the Meeting held on January 20, 2021.

- 2.2 The Minutes were confirmed without amendments on a motion moved by Mr. David Nakhid and seconded by Mr. Avinash Singh.

### **MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES**

- 3.1 The Chairman highlighted the following matter:

i. **Item 6.2, page 3 –**

- a. The Catholic Education Board of Management indicated that they need an additional four weeks to respond to the Committee’s request for written comments. Additionally, the CEO, Ms. Sharon Mangroo indicated that the Board would be uncomfortable appearing before the Committee without a written submission. As such, the Board declined the Committee’s invitation to participate.
- b. It should be noted that several of the other Boards were unable to make a written submission due to time and resource constraints, but did accept the Committee’s invitation and will be appearing this morning.

### **PRE-HEARING DISCUSSIONS RE: 2<sup>nd</sup> Hearing on the effects of the hybrid learning system on student performance in government and government-assisted schools during the revised COVID-19 restrictions**

- 4.1 The Chairman indicated that later in the proceedings, the Committee will convene its 2<sup>nd</sup> hearing with stakeholders pursuant to its *inquiry into the effects of the hybrid learning system on student performance in government and government-assisted schools during the revised COVID-19 restrictions*.

- 4.2 The Members were advised that officials of the following entities were expected to participate in the day’s hearing:

- i. Anglican Education Board of Management;
- ii. ASJA Board of Education;
- iii. Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha Board of Education;
- iv. Presbyterian Secondary Schools’ Board of Education;
- v. Presbyterian Primary Schools’ Board of Education;
- vi. Cluny Central Board of Education;
- vii. Baptist Board of Management; and
- viii. The Arya Pratinidhi Sabha School Board.

- 4.3 The Chairman confirmed that all Members were in receipt of the following documents:

- i. Written Submissions from the Cluny Central Board of Education, ASJA Board of Education and SDMS Board of Education; and

- ii. Issues Papers and a summary paper prepared by the Secretariat on the Written Submissions from Stakeholders.

4.4 The Committee discussed the approach to be taken to examine the Officials during the hearing.

## **OTHER BUSINESS**

### **Proposed Date and Agenda for Next Meeting**

5.1 The Committee agreed to meet next on **Wednesday March 17, 2021** to commence *its 3<sup>rd</sup> public hearing on its inquiry into the effects of the hybrid learning system on student performance*

5.2 The Committee agreed to meet with the following stakeholders at its next meeting:

A. A sample of organisations representing children with Special Needs including the:

- i. Down Syndrome Family Network;
- ii. Support Autism T&T;
- iii. Autism Parents Association of Trinidad and Tobago;
- iv. Trinidad and Tobago Blind Welfare Association;
- v. Academy for Special Needs;
- vi. Trinidad and Tobago Association for the Hearing Impaired;
- vii. Lady Hochoy Home;
- viii. Dyslexia Association; and
- ix. Princess Elizabeth Special School.

B. The Tobago House of Assembly, Division of Education, Innovation and Energy.

C. Ministry of Education (inclusive of the Student Support Services Division and Chief Education Officer)

## **SUSPENSION**

6.1 The Chairman suspended the meeting at 10:06 a.m.

**PUBLIC HEARING RE: 2<sup>nd</sup> Hearing on the effects of the hybrid learning system on student performance in government and government-assisted schools during the revised COVID-19 restrictions**

7.1 The meeting resumed in public at 10:22 a.m.

7.2 The following persons joined the meeting:

**Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha Board of Education**

1. Mr. Vijay Maharaj                      General Secretary

**Official of the Arya Pratinidhi Sabha of Trinidad and Tobago**

1. Mr. Ravi Rambarran                      Secretary

**Official of the Presbyterian Primary Schools' Board of Education**

1. Ms. Geeta K. Maharaj                      General Secretary

**Official of the Baptist Board of Management**

1. Mr. Michael Hills-Wilson                      Secretary

**Official of the St. Joseph Cluny Board of Education**

1. Ms. Debra East                      Principal (Secretary) Ag.

**Official of the ASJA Board of Education**

1. Mr. Rahimool Hosein                      General Secretary

**Official of the Anglican Board of Education**

1. Mrs. Avion Alexander-Titus                      Member (Representative of the Anglican Teachers Association)

**Official of the Presbyterian Secondary Schools' Board of Education**

1. Mr. Joel Bajnath                      General Secretary

**Opening Statements**

7.3 The aforementioned chief officials gave brief opening remarks.

**Key Issues Discussed**

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

The following are **general issues expressed during the hearing:**

**Communication between the Ministry of Education and Denominational Boards:**

- i. The Ministry of Education communicates directly with Principals. However, information communicated to Principals is not consistently shared with Denominational Boards;
- ii. The Boards expressed interest in having access to the statistics submitted by the Ministry of Education to the Committee in respect of this inquiry;
- iii. Boards have not received communication regarding criteria for the proposed means test used by the Ministry to assess which students should be given devices;
- iv. Greater guidance is needed from the Ministry of Education on standardized methods for evaluating students and performance management arrangements for teachers.

**Additional Support Required:**

- v. The online environment has intensified the need for intervention from Student Support Services;
- vi. Schools require individualised ICT support;
- vii. There is an urgent need for school vacancies to be filled, particularly middle management positions; and

**Collaboration Among Denominational Boards:**

- viii. Boards do not have the capacity to share financial resources but they collaborate on developing solutions to their shared challenges; and
- ix. There has been a proposal developed to secure low-cost internet connectivity for Denominational Schools.

The following are the main issues arising from discussions with the **Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha(SDMS) Board of Education:**

**Access to Devices and Connectivity:**

- i. Student access to devices and connectivity often depends on a combination of geographical and economic factors;
- ii. There has been an improvement in students accessing devices and connectivity via assistance from the SDMS Board, the Ministry of Education and parents;
- iii. Approximately 30% of SDMS students are without devices. These students are mainly in the lower classes in the Primary Schools and lower forms in the Secondary Schools;
- iv. 50 devices were donated by private citizens and 500 devices were acquired from the Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago (TATT);

**Transition to Hybrid Learning:**

- v. The transition to hybrid learning in the upper forms has been good; and

- vi. Schools have been adjusted timetables so that online learning does not clash with face-to-face learning.

The following are the main issues arising from discussions with the **Arya Pratinidhi Sabha of Trinidad and Tobago:**

**General Information:**

- i. The Arya Pratinidhi Sabha is responsible for nine (9) Primary schools and One (1) Early Childhood Centre. These schools are primarily located in rural areas;

**Access to Devices and Connectivity:**

- ii. There has been mixed experiences with the connectivity and devices;
- iii. For example, all students at the Ghandi Memorial (Aranguez) have access to both devices or connectivity. The General Secretary attributes this to the higher socio-economic status in that area. However, in the Barrackpore/Rio Claro area, many students do not have access to devices and/or internet connectivity;
- iv. Approximately 15 % of students do not have access to the online learning environment; Many of these students were under-performing prior to the pandemic. This amounts to approximately 200 students without devices;
- v. The Arya Pratinidhi Sabha recommends a targeted intervention by the Ministry of Education for students who are not accessing education, particularly those of low socio-economic status;
- vi. The majority of devices acquired by the Arya Pratinidhi Sabha were donated by the Private Sector;

**Advantages and Disadvantages of the Online Learning Environment:**

- vii. One of the advantages of the online learning environment is that students have become more computer literate;
- viii. One of the disadvantages of the online learning environment is that assessment tools are unreliable as teachers' suspect that some parents have been assisting their children; and
- ix. The online learning environment is not ideal for Primary School students.

The following are the main issues arising from discussions with the **Baptist Board of Management:**

**Access to Devices and Connectivity:**

- i. Approximately 75% of students under the purview of the Baptist Board of Management have been able to access the online learning environment;

**Response to Printed Packages:**

- ii. Parents have been collecting printed packages. However, some of the completed packages are not returned to the schools in a timely manner; and
- iii. The Baptist Board of Management recommends that Social Workers should be assigned to visiting the homes of students whose packages are not returned on time.

The following are the main issues arising from discussions with the **Presbyterian Primary Schools' Board of Education:**

**Access to Devices and Connectivity:**

- i. Approximately 87% of students are online. The remaining students lack devices and/or reliable internet connectivity;
- ii. The Presbyterian Primary Schools have received devices for approximately 3 schools through the Adopt-a-School Programme;
- iii. 1/3 of schools have received just over 300 devices from the Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago (TATT);
- iv. Standard 5 students have been given preference to receive donated devices;
- v. Approximately 2,500 Standard 5 students received devices from sources including the Ministry of Education and Private Sector;

**Response to Printed Packages:**

- vi. The schools have consistently prepared packages for students without access to the online learning environment. However, there is a challenge whereby parents are not collecting or returning these packages for correction within a timely manner;

**Additional Support Required:**

- vii. Schools need more support from the Student Support Services Division to assist with behavioural and other challenges. Additional challenges faced by students include a lack of parental supervision, stress and absenteeism;
- viii. The Presbyterian Primary Schools' Board of Education recommends having more guidance counsellors and social workers assigned to each school district; and
- ix. One concern with the anticipated return of Standard 5 students in April is that the proposed number of medical personnel to service each school district is insufficient.

The following are the main issues arising from discussions with the **St. Joseph Cluny Board of Education:**

**Access to Devices and Connectivity:**

- i. Most students have access to both devices and the internet. These devices were provided by the Board, Alumni, and other stakeholders;
- ii. 4 of these devices were donated through the Adopt-a-School programme;



- iii. Some students are using mobile phones to access classes;

### **Response to Printed Packages**

- iv. The package system was not effective as there was inconsistency in students' work being returned to the school;

### **Mental Health Concerns**

- v. Some students have been experiencing isolation and other mental health challenges during the transition to online learning;
- vi. Life Skills workshops have been implemented to support students' mental health;
- vii. There is a compulsory period each week where students meet with their class teachers to address any issues;

### **Transition to Hybrid Learning:**

- viii. Teachers assigned to upper-forms are required to set asynchronous work for online students on the days they teach face-to-face;
- ix. Teachers are not allowed to cover new topics online when their students are required to attend school face-to-face sessions for labs, SBAs or Internal Assessments;
- x. Form 5 students have not had the opportunity to sit mock exams. They have been exposed only to continuous and formative assessments. However, CSEC exams will be summative in nature;

### **Review of Grant Allocations:**

- xi. A review of grant allocations to schools is necessary as Cluny Schools have not received grants needed to run labs. With COVID-19 protocols in place, students need to have individual lab stations and previous allocations are insufficient to cover this cost.

The following are the main issues arising from discussions with the **Anjuman Sunnat ul Jamaat Association (ASJA) Board of Education:**

### **General Information:**

- i. ASJA is responsible for thirteen (13) Government-assisted schools- seven (7) Primary Schools and six (6) Secondary Schools;

### **Access to Devices and Connectivity:**

- ii. The majority of ASJA students are able to access devices. However, the Board is concerned that the children who are not able to access devices are at a disadvantage;
- iii. Less than 10% of students are without devices;
- iv. The majority of devices donated to ASJA schools came from the Private Sector;
- v. Teachers are adjusting well to the online learning environment;

### **Adapting to the Online Learning Environment**

- vi. One of the advantages of the online learning environment is that teachers are able to access teaching resources quickly to address questions that come up in real time;
- vii. Some teachers face a challenge in balancing time between online teaching and collecting/returning packages;
- viii. Some teachers have had to subscribe to personal Zoom accounts in order to facilitate one-on-one meetings with students as the Ministry of Education's platform does not allocate enough time;

### **Transition to Hybrid Learning:**

- xii. There have been no reported problems with the return to face-to-face lessons for some upper-form students; and
- xiii. Timetables have been adjusted to avoid clashes between face-to-face and online learning.

The following are the main issues arising from discussions with the **Anglican Board of Education**:

### **Access to Devices and Connectivity:**

- i. There has been an increase in the number of children who are able to access synchronous online learning. However, this increase has been attributed to the use of mobile devices;
- ii. Between 25% and 30% of students do not have access to devices;
- iii. Access to devices has been inconsistent due to devices being damaged;

### **Students from Vulnerable Groups:**

- iv. Depending on the school district, there is a disparity in the level of responsiveness from Student Support Services to student absence from the online learning environment;
- v. There are students who the schools have not been able to reach at all. These students are often from families of lower socio-economic status;
- vi. There are homes where students have access to both devices and internet connectivity but do not log in for classes due to lack of supervision or low value placed on education by their families;
- vii. Interventions from Student Support Services often take place with the student. However, including other family members in the interventions will be more effective in resolving challenges experienced by the student.

### **Adapting to the Online Learning Environment:**

- viii. Some students take up to an entire term to become acclimatised to the online learning environment thereby requiring teachers to re-teach certain subjects;

- ix. Performance Task Assessments are used to evaluate students. In this form of assessment, students meet with teachers one-on-one online and answer comprehensive questions based on skills taught throughout the term; and

**Response to Printed Packages:**

- x. Packages are effective for reinforcement of lessons but are ineffective as a means of teaching new concepts, particularly for younger students;

The following are the main issues arising from discussions with the **Presbyterian Secondary Schools' Board of Education:**

**Access to Devices and Connectivity:**

- i. The majority of students have received devices. However, connectivity remains a challenge for some students;
- ii. 95% of students attend online classes;

**Adapting to the Online Learning Environment:**

- iii. Parents are contacted when students do not sign-in for classes;
- iv. Assessment tools include project-based assignments and require students to submit hard copy assignments to the school; and

**Transition to Hybrid Learning:**

- v. One of the challenges with students returning to in-person learning has been the need to hire private safety officers and additional staff to maintain COVID-19 protocols.

**ADJOURNMENT**

8.1 The meeting was adjourned accordingly at 12:31 p.m.

I certify that these Minutes are true and correct.

Chairman

Secretary

March 09, 2021

**MINUTES OF THE FIFTH MEETING OF THE JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE OF  
PARLIAMENT ON SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION,  
HELD ON WEDNESDAY MARCH 17, 2021**

**This meeting was facilitated via the Zoom video conferencing program**

**PRESENT**

**Members of the Committee**

Mr. Paul Richards	Chairman
Mr. Esmond Forde, MP	Member
Ms. Pennelope Beckles, MP	Member
Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh, MP	Member
Mr. Roger Monroe, MP	Vice-Chairman
Mr. David Nakhid	Member
Mr. Avinash Singh	Member

**ABSENT/EXCUSED**

Mr. Rohan Sinanan	Member
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**Secretariat**

Mr. Julien Ogilvie	Secretary
Mr. Brian Lucio	Assistant Secretary
Ms. Aaneesa Baksh	Researcher
Ms. Nicole Brown	Researcher

**CALL TO ORDER**

- 1.1 The Chairman called the meeting to order at 9:37 a.m. and welcomed members present.

**CONFIRMATION OF MINUTES OF THE FOURTH MEETING HELD ON WEDNESDAY  
FEBRUARY 17, 2021**

- 2.1 The Chairman invited Members to examine page-by-page, the Minutes of the Meeting held on February 17, 2021.

- 2.2 The Minutes were confirmed without amendments on a motion moved by Mr. Avinash Singh and seconded by Ms. Penelope Beckles, MP.

### **MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES**

- 3.1 The Chairman highlighted the following matter:
- i. **Item 3.1, page 2** –The Catholic Education Board of Management indicated that they are currently collating the various responses and will endeavor to submit by Friday March 26, 2021.
  - ii. **Item 5.2, i, e, page 3** – The Academy for Special Needs indicated that they do not fall under the categories of Government or Government-assisted but still shared their comments with the Committee. The comments were circulated by email dated March 16, 2021.

### **PRE-HEARING DISCUSSIONS RE: 3<sup>rd</sup> Hearing on the effects of the hybrid learning system on student performance in government and government-assisted schools during the revised COVID-19 restrictions**

- 4.1 The Chairman indicated that later in the proceedings, the Committee will convene its 3<sup>rd</sup> hearing with stakeholders pursuant to its *inquiry into the effects of the hybrid learning system on student performance in government and government-assisted schools during the revised COVID-19 restrictions*.
- 4.2 The Members were advised that officials of the following entities were expected to participate in the day's hearing:
- i. Down Syndrome Family Network;
  - ii. Support Autism T&T;
  - iii. Association of Administrators of Public Special Schools Trinidad and Tobago;
  - iv. and Tobago;
  - v. Trinidad and Tobago Blind Welfare Association;
  - vi. Private Special Schools Association of Trinidad and Tobago;
  - vii. Princess Elizabeth Special School;
  - viii. Consortium of Disability Organizations (CODO);
  - ix. Cascade School for the Deaf;
  - x. Audrey Jeffers School for the Deaf;
  - xi. Ministry of Education (inclusive of the Student Support Services Division); and
  - xii. Tobago House of Assembly, Division of Education, Innovation and Energy.
- 4.3 The Chairman confirmed that all Members were in receipt of the following documents:

- 4.4 Written Submissions from the:
- i. Down Syndrome Family Network ASJA Board of Education;
  - ii. Tobago House of Assembly: Division of Education, Innovation and Energy;
  - iii. The Trinidad and Tobago Blind Welfare Association;
  - iv. Consortium of Disability Organisation (CODO);
  - v. Support Autism T&T;
  - vi. Private Special Schools Association of Trinidad and Tobago (PSSATT); and
  - vii. Association of Administrators of Public Special Schools Trinidad and Tobago.
- 4.5 Issues Papers and a summary paper prepared by the Secretariat on the Written Submissions from Stakeholders.
- 4.6 The Committee discussed the approach to be taken to examine the Officials during the hearing.

## **OTHER BUSINESS**

### **Proposed Date and Agenda for Next Meeting**

- 5.1 The Committee agreed to meet next on **Wednesday April 21, 2021** to commence *its 4<sup>th</sup> public hearing on its inquiry into the effects of the hybrid learning system on student performance*
- 5.2 The Committee agreed to meet with the following stakeholders at its next meeting:
- A. Telecommunication providers:
    - a. Telecommunications Services of Trinidad and Tobago/Bmobile;
    - b. Digicel; and
    - c. Flow.
  - B. Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago; and
  - C. Ministry of Public Administration and Digital Transformation.

## **SUSPENSION**

- 6.1 The Chairman suspended the meeting at 10:10 a.m.

### **PUBLIC HEARING RE: 3<sup>rd</sup> Hearing on the effects of the hybrid learning system on student performance in government and government-assisted schools during the revised COVID-19 restrictions**

- 7.1 The meeting resumed in public at 10:20 a.m.

7.2 The following persons joined the meeting:

**Ministry of Education**

- |                                 |                                       |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1. Mrs. Lenor Baptiste-Simmons  | Permanent Secretary                   |
| 2. Ms. Mary Bastien             | Coordinator, Guidance and Counselling |
| 3. Mrs. Leticia Rodriguez-Cupid | Coordinator, Special Education        |

**Tobago House of Assembly – Division of Education, Innovation and Energy**

- |                                     |                        |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------|
| 1. Mrs. Sherry-Ann Rollocks-Hackett | Schools Supervisor III |
| 2. Mrs. Nadine John-St. Rose        | Curriculum Coordinator |

**Private Special Schools Association**

- |                         |                 |
|-------------------------|-----------------|
| 1. Ms. Phillis Griffith | President       |
| 2. Dr. Shara Zoe        | Ordinary Member |

**Support Autism Trinidad and Tobago (SATT)**

- |                      |                  |
|----------------------|------------------|
| 1. Dr. Radica Mahase | Director/Founder |
|----------------------|------------------|

**Down Syndrome Family Network**

- |                      |                       |
|----------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Ms. Lisa J. Ghany | Honorary Board Member |
|----------------------|-----------------------|

**Trinidad and Tobago Blind Welfare Association**

- |                       |                   |
|-----------------------|-------------------|
| 1. Mr. Kenneth Suratt | Executive Officer |
|-----------------------|-------------------|

**Association of Administrators of Public Special Schools Trinidad and Tobago**

- |                      |           |
|----------------------|-----------|
| 1. Mr. Derrick Mundy | President |
|----------------------|-----------|

**Consortium of Disability Organizations (CODO)**

- |                           |           |
|---------------------------|-----------|
| 1. Ms. Jacqueline Leotaud | President |
|---------------------------|-----------|

**Audrey Jeffers School for the Deaf**

- |                      |           |
|----------------------|-----------|
| 1. Ms. Veronica John | Principal |
|----------------------|-----------|

**Princes Elizabeth Special School**

- |                         |           |
|-------------------------|-----------|
| 1. Mr. Gerard Frederick | Principal |
|-------------------------|-----------|

**Cascade School for the Deaf**

- |                           |                 |
|---------------------------|-----------------|
| 1. Ms. Francisca Monsegue | Principal (Ag.) |
|---------------------------|-----------------|

**Opening Statements**

7.3 The aforementioned chief officials gave brief opening remarks.

**Key Issues Discussed**

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

The following are the main issues arising from discussions with the **Ministry of Education:**

**Student Support Services Division (SSSD)**

- i. The Students Support Services Division is a school-based service. As such, a child needs to be enrolled in school as a pre-requisite for referral.

- ii. The SSSD is currently 20% staffed;
- iii. Cases referred to the SSSD:
  - a. 3,365 students suspected/diagnosed with disability;
  - b. 2,341 cases actively being addressed; and
  - c. 1,214 being accessed and receiving interventions.
- iv. The SSSD hotline receives an average of 15 calls per day regarding assistance for special needs students.
- v. In addition to the 5 behavioural specialists, 9 clinical psychologists and 9 school psychologists employed by SSSD, the division has also outsourced additional psycho-educational assessment services.
- vi. There needs to be a restructuring of the SSSD to function more effectively. Limited staffing has affected the action time for the referrals.

### **Training on Special Needs**

- vii. Training sessions for teachers to treat with special needs students have been hosted by the Ministry during the period October 2020 to March 2021.

### **Online Classes and Printed Packages**

- viii. The prolonged use of on-line modalities by special needs students have resulted in increased emotional outbursts, seizures and depression due to lack of social interactions.
- ix. In contrast to their mainstream counterparts, some special needs students have responded better to using the printed packages rather than using the online learning tools.

### **Inclusive Education**

- x. The inclusive Schools Project started in 2019 but has been challenged due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The following are the main issues arising from discussions with the **Tobago House of Assembly - Division of Education, Innovation and Energy:**

### **Special Needs Schools in Tobago**

- i. There are two schools that cater to 113 special needs students in Tobago - the School for the Deaf, Speech and Language Impaired and Happy Haven School.
- ii. The allocation for the two special needs schools in Tobago:
  - a. School for the Deaf, Speech and Language Impaired - \$1.5 million; and
  - b. Happy Haven School- \$2.2 million.



### **Student Support Services**

- iii. Special Education Teachers and Guidance Officers interact with special needs students who attend mainstream schools in Tobago.
- iv. The need for Teachers Aides at mainstream schools for special needs students who attend mainstream schools.
- v. The Digicel Foundation has donated devices for special needs students. However, not all students are equipped with the knowledge of how to use the devices for learning.
- vi. The Division has been training parents to assist their children with interfacing and accessing virtual learning tools via the donated devices.

### **Assessments**

- vii. Authentic and performance-based assessments via videos, e-journals and worksheets are used to assess special needs students.

The following are the main issues arising from discussions with the **Down Syndrome Family Network**:

### **General Information**

- i. 20% of children registered with the organisation are not enrolled in an educational institution.
- ii. Less than 10% of the children registered with the network received assistance from the Ministry of Education.

### **Education System**

- iii. The need for the existing education system to be re-designed to become inclusive for special needs students.
- iv. Many special needs students have been refused admission into mainstream schools.
- v. The need for legislation to clearly identify the treatment of special needs children in mainstream education as there has been challenges with interpreting the Education Act, Chap. 39:01 as it relates to special needs students.

### **Assessments**

- vi. There must be a change in the perception of what children with special needs can achieve.
- vii. There are several children within the Network with Down Syndrome who are awaiting assessments and Teachers' Aides.

### **Support of the Network**

- viii. The Network has been sharing information resources for parents of special needs students and hosted various workshops to assist parents and students.
- ix. The Network also refers parents and students in need to relevant agencies who can assist.

The following are the main issues arising from discussions with the **Private Special Schools Association**:

#### **General Information:**

- i. The Association comprises of 13 registered primary schools and 3 partner schools.
- ii. The students taught at the schools are predominantly autistic.
- iii. The Association receives partial funding from the Ministry of Education for ten months of the year.
- iv. The registered private schools who receive the partial funding are operating under an expired MOU with the MOE

The following are the main issues arising from discussions with the **Support Autism Trinidad and Tobago (SATT)**:

#### **General Information:**

- i. Support Autism does not receive any subventions from the State.
- ii. The majority of children with autism are not enrolled in an educational institution and have not been receiving a formal education.
- iii. Public awareness and education has been advocated by SATT and other organisations for several years as such the current focus is access to opportunities for special needs children.

#### **Teachers' Aides**

- iv. Several Teacher's Aides have not had their contracts renewed, leaving Autistic students without this necessary support services.

#### **Recommendations**

- v. The SATT recommends that the Ministry address the following:
  - a. the delay in recruiting teachers' aides;
  - b. access to therapy for special needs children in every district; and
  - c. provide the list of pilots schools of participating in the inclusive education project to stakeholders.

The following are the main issues arising from discussions with the **Association of Administrators of Public Special Schools Trinidad and Tobago:**

**General Information**

- i. There are two types of curricula in special schools: the expanded core curriculum and the core curriculum.

**Support for Special Needs Schools**

- ii. The need for appropriate health and safety infrastructure against COVID-19 to be installed for public special schools.
- iii. The need for individualized education programme to meet the needs of special needs students.
- iv. The need for a specialized unit to focus on providing support for special needs school.
- v. There is currently no Braille Production Unit at the School for Blind Children.
- vi. The average cost of screen reader software for devices is \$6,000.00.
- vii. There must be School Supervisors who are aware of the unique needs of special schools
- viii. The MOE needs to assign a curriculum officer specifically for Special Schools.
- ix. Workshops are not enough, there is a need for postgraduate degrees that provide training in the area of educating special needs students.

The following are the main issues arising from discussions with the **Consortium of Disability Organizations (CODO):**

**General Information**

- i. The Organisation coordinates quarterly family workshops which delivered using PowerPoint and other presentations tools.

The following are the main issues arising from discussions with the **Audrey Jeffers School for the Deaf:**

**General Information**

- i. The school receives \$2,000.00 per year from their umbrella organisation.

**Devices**

- ii. Devices were provided for all students at the school by the Digicel Foundation.
- iii. Many times the devices are not ideal as the screen is small and students need to be able to see the hands and mouth of the person presenting in order to be able to communicate.

**Assessments**

- iv. Assessments for special needs students are conducted using projects and worksheets.

The following are the main issues arising from discussions with the **Princes Elizabeth Special School:**

### **General Information**

- i. Princes Elizabeth Special Schools have been experiencing resistance when registering students for terminal examinations;
- ii. Once a special school is registered as a primary school, the school is unable to teach a Technical Vocational or Caribbean Vocational Qualification (CVQ) subjects which may equip special need students to earn an income in the future;

### **Student Support Services**

- iii. In addition to special education teachers, special needs students need the support of occupational therapists, physio therapists, speech therapists, psychologists and mobility specialists.
- iv. The need for school supervisors for special needs schools to understand the capabilities of special needs students.

### **Training**

- v. Special training must be given in order for students and teachers to effectively use technology for teaching and learning as the ability to use technology for everyday does not translate to the ability to use technology for education.
- vi. The Ministry of Education should partner with the University of the West Indies and University of Trinidad and Tobago to provide postgraduate training in special education.

The following are the main issues arising from discussions with the **Cascade School for the Deaf:**

### **General Information**

- i. The school enrolls students from ages 5-17. As such, it cannot be classified as a Primary school.
- ii. Hearing impaired students are visual and tactile learners.

### **Devices**

- iii. While the school received devices from Digicel Foundation, these devices are not the ideal size to facilitate communication between teachers and students.

### **Student Support Services**

- iv. Although the school has been assigned social workers, some do not know sign language, which hinders communication with students.

### **Teaching and Assessments**

- v. Summative and project-based assessments have been used to assess special needs students.
- vi. The schools had adapted the MOE guidelines for the blended learning system to the needs of their students.

- vii. Teachers have been engaged in bi-weekly peer support sessions where they share best practices in using the online learning environment.
- viii. Learning sign language is not enough to work with deaf and hearing impaired students, there are specific ways to teach these students.

The following are the main issues arising from discussions with the **Blind Welfare Association**:

**General Information**

- i. The Blind Welfare Association receives a subvention from the State but this is not specifically for the schools.

**Teaching Methods**

- ii. Blind and visually impaired children are oftentimes tactile learners.
- iii. Students whose sole disability is blindness do not need student aides and can be enrolled in mainstream schools.
- iv. The Blind Welfare Association recommends that blind and low vision children be given the opportunity to physically attend school a few days per week to learn foundational concepts to supplement the online teaching.
- v. The Blind Welfare Association recommends a system of itinerant teachers that operate in multiple schools who are trained to teach blind and visually impaired students Braille and orientation and navigation skills that will help them to cope with being blind.

**Access to Education Resources:**

- vi. The Association uses Non-Visual Desktop Access (NVDA), a free open source software that can assist with making computers accessible to persons who are blind or visually impaired.
- vii. There needs to be an MOU between NALIS, Accessible Books Consortium (ACB), World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) and the Government of Trinidad and Tobago to allow NALIS to access and redistribute the books in accessible format available at the ACB.

**ADJOURNMENT**

8.1 The meeting was adjourned accordingly at 12:49 p.m.

I certify that these Minutes are true and correct.

Chairman

Secretary

April 19, 2021

**UNCONFIRMED MINUTES OF THE SIXTH MEETING OF THE JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE  
OF PARLIAMENT ON SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION,  
HELD ON APRIL 21, 2021**

**This meeting was facilitated via the Zoom video conferencing program**

**PRESENT**

**Members of the Committee**

Mr. Paul Richards	Chairman
Mr. Esmond Forde, MP	Member
Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh, MP	Member
Mr. David Nakhid	Member
Mr. Avinash Singh	Member
Ms. Penelope Beckles, MP	Member
Mr. Rohan Sinanan	Member

**ABSENT/EXCUSED**

Mr. Roger Monroe, MP	Vice-Chairman
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**Secretariat**

Mr. Julien Ogilvie	Secretary
Mr. Brian Lucio	Assistant Secretary
Ms. Aaneesa Baksh	Researcher
Ms. Nicole Brown	Researcher

**CALL TO ORDER**

- 1.1 The Chairman called the meeting to order at 9:33 a.m. and welcomed members present.

**ANNOUNCEMENTS**

- 2.1 The Chairman advised that Mr. Roger Munroe, MP asked to be excused from the day's proceedings.

### **CONFIRMATION OF MINUTES OF THE FIFTH MEETING HELD ON WEDNESDAY MARCH 17, 2021**

- 3.1 The Minutes were confirmed without amendments on a motion moved by Mr. Avinash Singh and seconded by Ms. Pennelope Beckles, MP.

### **MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES**

- 4.1 The Chairman highlighted the following matter:

- i. **Item 3.1, page 2** – By email dated March 30, 2021, the Catholic Education Board of Management submitted their written response.

### **CONSIDERATION OF DRAFT PROPOSAL FOR AN INQUIRY INTO UNEMPLOYMENT DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

- 5.1 The Chairman invited comments on the draft Inquiry Proposal for an upcoming inquiry into unemployment during the COVID-19 pandemic and the State's capacity to provide support to persons who became unemployed as a result of the pandemic. The Committee considered the following proposed objectives:

- i. To examine the trends in unemployment and job losses in the private and public sectors during the COVID-19 pandemic;
- ii. To assess the unemployment relief strategies and programmes of the State during the COVID-19 pandemic;
- iii. To examine the proposed strategies of the State to stimulate job creation and employment opportunities to counteract the adverse economic consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic.

- 5.2 A discussion ensued, following which, the Committee agreed to the following objectives:

- i. To examine the trends in unemployment and job losses in the private and public sectors during the COVID-19 pandemic from March 2020 to March 2021;
- ii. To assess the unemployment relief strategies and programmes of the State during the COVID-19 pandemic;

- iii. To examine the proposed strategies of the State to stimulate job creation and employment opportunities to counteract the adverse economic consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic;
- iv. To examine the changes in the operations of the private sector to sustain business during the COVID-19 pandemic.

5.3 The Committee also agreed that the following stakeholders should be engaged:

- i. Tobago representation;
- ii. Cipriani College of Labour and Co-operative Studies;
- iii. Umbrella Trade Unions (JTUM, FITUN and NATUC);
- iv. Umbrella body for smaller Business Associations; and
- v. Industrial Court.

**PUBLIC HEARING RE: 4<sup>th</sup> Hearing on the effects of the hybrid learning system on student performance in government and government-assisted schools during the revised COVID-19 restrictions**

6.1 The Chairman indicated that later in the proceedings, the Committee will convene its 4<sup>th</sup> hearing with stakeholders pursuant to its *inquiry into the effects of the hybrid learning system on student performance in government and government-assisted schools during the revised COVID-19 restrictions*.

6.2 The Members were advised that officials of the following entities were expected to participate in the day's hearing:

- i. Ministry of Public Administration and Digital Transformation;
- ii. Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago (TATT);
- iii. Telecommunication Services of Trinidad and Tobago;
- iv. Digicel Trinidad and Tobago; and
- v. Columbus Communications Trinidad Limited (FLOW).

6.3 The Chairman confirmed that all Members were in receipt of the following documents:

- i. Written Submissions from the:
  - a. Ministry of Public Administration and Digital Transformation;
  - b. Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago (TATT);
  - c. Telecommunication Services of Trinidad and Tobago;
  - d. Digicel- Trinidad and Tobago; and
  - e. Columbus Communications Trinidad Limited (FLOW).



- ii. Issues Papers prepared by the Secretariat on the Written Submissions from Stakeholders.

6.4 The Committee discussed the approach to be taken to examine the Officials during the hearing.

## **OTHER BUSINESS**

### **Proposed Date and Agenda for Next Meeting**

7.1 The Committee agreed that the Chairman would consult the Secretary to schedule the Committee's next meeting day.

## **SUSPENSION**

8.1 The Chairman suspended the meeting at 10:11 a.m.

### **PUBLIC HEARING RE: 4<sup>th</sup> Hearing on the effects of the hybrid learning system on student performance in government and government-assisted schools during the revised COVID-19 restrictions**

9.1 The meeting resumed in public at 10:17 a.m.

9.2 The following persons joined the meeting:

#### **Ministry of Public Administration and Digital Transformation**

1. Mr. Claudelle McKellar Permanent Secretary (Ag)
2. Mr. Charles Bobb-Semple Head, National Information and Communication Technology Division

#### **Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago (TATT)**

1. Ms. Cynthia Reddock-Downes Chief Executive Officer
2. Mr. Kirk Sookram Deputy Chief Executive Officer

#### **Telecommunication Services of Trinidad and Tobago (TSTT)**

1. Ms. Lisa Agard Chief Executive Officer (Ag.)
2. Mr. Kenrick Garcia Chief Technology Officer (Ag.)

#### **Digicel Trinidad and Tobago**

1. Mr. Abraham Smith Chief Executive Officer
2. Chandrika Samaroo Operations Director

### **Columbus Communications Trinidad Limited (FLOW)**

1. Mr. Kurleigh Prescod           Country Manager
2. Ms. Cindy-Ann Gatt           Commercial Director

### **Opening Statements**

9.3     The aforementioned chief officials gave brief opening remarks.

### **Key Issues Discussed**

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

The following are the main issues arising from discussions with the **Ministry of Public Administration and Digital Transformation (MPADT)**:

#### **Facilitation of online learning**

- ii.     The Ministry of Public Administration and Digital Transformation has facilitated online and blended learning through initiatives including;
  - Provision of additional spectrum to mobile service providers;
  - Providing TT Wi-Fi to additional locations across the country; and
  - Making ICT Access Centres available.
- iii.    The MPADT has been engaging with the MOE with regard to further development of the Learning Management System;
- iv.     The MPADT plans to prioritise digital transformation in the following Ministries:
  - Ministry of Education;
  - Ministry of Social Development and Family Services; and
  - Ministry of Health.

#### **ICT Access Centres**

- v.     MPADT's 6 operational ICT Access Centres have been set up in under-served communities. Current locations were decided based on empirical evidence from TATT's 2014 Digital Divide survey;
- vi.    The MPADT intends to set up an additional 13 ICT Access Centres during the current fiscal year. MPADT will be responsible for 8 of these centres while TATT will be responsible for the remaining 5 Access Centres;
- vii.   Areas to be targeted for these centres include Beetham Gardens, La Pastora, La Horquetta, Lopinot, Toco, Roxborough, Moruga and Fifth Company. The remaining Centres will be determined at a later date.

The following are the main issues arising from discussions with the **Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago (TAAT)**

### **Liberalisation of the Telecommunications and Broadcast Sector**

- i. The liberalisation of the Telecommunications and Broadcast Sector, covered by the Telecommunications Act has led to multiple service providers in the sector. The statistics are as follows:
  - 8 internet service providers;
  - 2 mobile providers;
  - 16 broadcast stations via cable;
  - 5 free-to-air television broadcast stations; and
  - 37 radio stations.

### **Role in Providing Devices and Connectivity to Students**

- ii. Over 6,000 devices have been delivered to schools via TATT's Universal Services Initiative Project. This has been particularly helpful for households with multiple children as each child is now able to have their own device;
- iii. TATT has found that affordability continues to be a major hurdle to families being able to access the internet. Consequently, the Authority is designing initiatives to reduce gaps in the affordability of both devices and internet service via the Universal Service Fund;
- iv. The Universal Services Initiative Project initially provided subsidies for specially adapted devices for visually and hearing impaired children between ages 12 and 18 years old. The project has been expanded to cover children with varying disabilities from 5 years of age;
- v. TATT in partnership with Digicel and TSTT (Bmobile) supplied the Ministry of Education with 10,000 devices. These devices came with SIM Cards and internet access for a period of three months. The Authority has agreed to extend connectivity on these devices until the end of the current school year;
- vi. The Authority has also provided Wi-Fi to schools in order to facilitate blended learning;
- vii. Devices provided to the MOE are under manufacturer's warranty;
- viii. Families in receipt of devices from TATT were required to sign formal agreements which stipulated that they use the devices in a manner that minimises damage.

### **Research and Public Education**

- ix. The last Digital Divide Survey was conducted in 2013/2014.
- x. TATT has commenced their 2021 Digital Inclusion Survey. This survey covers not just gaps in access to ICTs but also skills gaps in being able to use technology. TATT has launched public education programmes related to online safety as a means of helping parents to protect their children from inappropriate online content.

The following are the main issues arising from discussions with the **Telecommunication Services of Trinidad and Tobago (TSTT)**:

### **Market Overview**

- i. Since the introduction of competition in the broadband sector, penetration moved from 34% to 84%.
- ii. TSTT has reached over 95% of the population with broadband internet (fixed and wireless).
- iii. TSTT has determined that there are three communities without broadband access, namely Bonne Aventure, La Lune, and Icacos.
- iv. Approximately 84% of the 401,000 households in Trinidad and Tobago have accessed high speed broadband internet (10mb and over).
- v. The gap between uptake and coverage is indicative of an affordability issue.
- vi. 55% of the population access the internet via mobile devices.
- vii. There was a 2.9% increase in fixed broadband subscriptions from December 2019 to December 2020.
- viii. Power outages have affected internet access in certain areas. These outages sometimes last longer than backup batteries are able to provide power to TSTT's equipment.
- ix. TSTT plans to expand the Free Public Wi-Fi initiative currently available at the Queen's Park Savannah and Woodford Square.

### **Role in online education**

- x. TSTT has partnered with Digicel and Flow to offer low income households a subsidised internet package for \$100. Each company will offer this package to 2,000 households for a total of 6,000 households benefitting. The MOE will conduct a means test to select households for this initiative.
- xi. TSTT has launched the bproductive 30-day mobile plan for students at a cost of \$167 per month (VAT inclusive) to facilitate remote learning.
- xii. The Archdiocese of Port of Spain is the coordinating body for Denominational schools to provide names of students without devices to TSTT.
- xiii. In the absence of adequate legislation, TSTT cannot regulate internet access and therefore cannot block offensive and obscene internet websites/content to specifically safeguard students.
- xiv. The Ministry of Education's Online learning sites can be accessed for free.

The following are the main issues arising from discussions with the **Digicel Trinidad and Tobago**:

### **Market Overview**

- i. Digicel has been operating in Trinidad and Tobago for fifteen (15) years
- ii. In 2016, the company brought additional broadband infrastructure to Trinidad and Tobago
- iii. The company offered over \$170 million in relief during the Covid-19 pandemic

- iv. Digicel provides fixed connectivity to over 84% of households and mobile coverage to over 98%
- v. In the past 2 months there has been a growth in consumption on the Digicel network as follows:
  - 56% increase in fixed network usage;
  - 64% increase in mobile data usage;
  - 18%-20% increase in mobile data per user; and
  - 46% increase in fixed network usage per user.
- vi. Digicel's ability to provide reliable service has been hampered by power outages as well as fibre breaks.

### **Online Safety**

- vii. Digicel has partnered with the TTPS cybercrime unit to conduct webinars to promote online safety for children. They also provide a mobile application which gives parents the ability to monitor, regulate and control children's online activity. This is provided free for a two-month period. They have also included parental controls in one of their Wi-Fi products for home internet users.

The following are the main issues arising from discussions with the **Columbus Communications Trinidad Limited (FLOW)**:

### **Market Overview**

- i. Flow has expanded its internet service to areas that did not previously have broadband coverage.
- ii. Flow experienced a 40% increase in use of its broadband internet service.
- iii. The high cost of pole rentals is a prohibitive factor which affects Flow's ability to provide service to rural homes.

### **Role in Online Education**

- iv. The company has delivered internet access to Student Support Centres where students who do not have internet connectivity at home can access online learning.
- v. They have also provided devices to students.
- vi. The company has increased the megabytes offered to their internet customer packages at no additional cost.

## **ADJOURNMENT**

10.1 The meeting was adjourned accordingly at 12:31 p.m.

I certify that these Minutes are true and correct.

Chairman

Secretary

June 25, 2021

## Appendix III – Verbatim Notes of Meetings

### VERBATIM NOTES OF THE THIRD VIRTUAL MEETING OF THE SOCIAL SERVICES & PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION COMMITTEE HELD IN PUBLIC ON WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 20, 2020, AT 10.30 A.M.

#### PRESENT

Mr. Paul Richards	Chairman
Mr. Esmond Forde	Vice-Chairman
Mr. Roger Munroe	Member
Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh	Member
Mr. Avinash Singh	Member
Mr. David Nakhid	Member
Mr. Julien Ogilvie	Secretary
Mr. Johnson Greenidge	Assistant Secretary
Ms. Aaneesa Baksh	Graduate Research Assistant
Ms. Nicole Brown	Parliamentary Intern

#### ABSENT

Mrs. Penelope Beckles-Robinson	Member [ <i>Excused</i> ]
Mr. Rohan Sinanan	Member [ <i>Excused</i> ]
Ms. Allyson West	Member

#### National Primary Schools Principals' Association of Trinidad and Tobago

Mr. Lance Mottley	President
Mrs. Paula Kalkman	1 <sup>st</sup> Vice President

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

Mrs. Sherra Carrington-James	President
Ms. Patricia Pit	Secretary

#### Ministry of Education

Mrs. Lisa Henry-David	Chief Education Officer (Ag.)
Ms. Anna Singh	Director, Curriculum Planning and Development Division
Mrs. Kamini Bhagaloo	Assistant Director, Division of Education Research and Evaluation

## **Trinidad and Tobago Unified Teachers Association (TTUTA)**

Mrs. Antonia Tekah-De-Freitas                      President

Mr. Bradon Roberts                                      Tobago Officer

Mrs. Lisa Ibrahim-Joseph                              Education and Research Officer

**Mr. Chairman:** Good morning and welcome to the viewing and listening audience to this the first virtual hearing of the Joint Select Committee on Social Services and Public Administration. This the Committee's first hearing with stakeholders pursuant to its enquiry into the effects of the hybrid learning system on student performance in government and government-assisted schools during the revised COVID-19 restrictions.

We would like to remind participants that this is a virtual meeting and certain specific guidelines will apply including making sure you mute your microphone when you are not speaking to help keep background noise and distractions to a minimum. We also advise you to try and focus on the microphone situation because in the past sometimes it is very easy to lose track that your mike is on or off, and will be making a contribution sometimes we cannot hear you because you inadvertently left your mike off or left your mike on.

We would like you to adjust your camera so that your face is clearly visible at all times and ensure that notifications from your cellphone or any other electronic device in your vicinity are muted during the course of this meeting, sometimes they cause distractions.

We have four groups before us today. I am the Committee's Chairman, Paul Richards and the groups before us include the Ministry of Education representatives, representatives of the Trinidad and Tobago Unified Teachers Association (TTUTA), the Association of Principals of Public Secondary Schools of Trinidad and Tobago (APPSST&T), and the National Primary Schools Principals' Association of Trinidad and Tobago. At this time, I would like to invite members of our committee to introduce themselves starting with member Forde.

*[Introductions made]*

**Mr. Chairman:** I would like to offer excuses for two members the committee who are currently engaged in Cabinet activities, including Penelope Beckles and also Mr. Rohan Sinanan. So those two are also members of the committee but they are currently engaged in Cabinet activities.

So, thank you for all for joining us and we want to welcome of course once again, our viewing and listening audience. At this time, I would like to identify the four objectives of this enquiry and they are: One, to assess the effectiveness of the hybrid learning system used by government and government-assisted schools in curriculum delivery; two, to compare and contrast student



performance using traditional versus hybrid learning systems for similar time frames. We would have had the last nine or so months in terms of the introduction of digital and online learning systems in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Three, to examine the systems and methods used to monitor and evaluate student performance in the hybrid learning environment, and four, to assess the readiness of the hybrid learning system to adequately prepare students for external examinations. We have some examinations coming up including CAPE and CSEC, and SEA once again in the not too distant future. At this time, I would like to also invite representatives of the various groups before us to introduce themselves briefly. Starting with the officials of the Ministry of Education.

*[Introductions made]*

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. Could Mrs. Tekah-De-Freitas introduce herself and her team please? From TTUTA.

*[Introductions made]*

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you, and from the Association of Principals of Public Secondary Schools of Trinidad and Tobago (APPSST&T), can Mrs. Carrington-James introduce herself and her team please?

*[Introductions made]*

**Mr. Chairman:** And last but by no means least, the officials of the National Primary Schools Principals' Association of Trinidad and Tobago, and Mr. Mottley, please introduce yourself and your team.

*[Introductions made]*

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you all for being with us. We appreciate your time this morning. Just to give us some context to start I would like to give some information, some data on a submission from the Education Ministry dated December 15<sup>th</sup>, and it was in response to a request for written submission on the enquiry into the effects of the hybrid learning system, and student performance in government and government-assisted schools during the revised COVID-19 restrictions.

And, we also received, which I would like to acknowledge, submissions from the stakeholders who are with us today in addition to three private citizens, Aba Luke who is a parent, Avionne McNish who is parent, and also Sparkle Martin, who is a parent. And their contributions are in paraphrase and will be read into the record during the course of this interface. Because I think it is important also to hear from citizens about their experiences which have been good and bad but we will share this with you as the session progresses.

So, one of the highlighted bits of information I would like to start with is from the Education Ministry and to a question, what has been the feedback obtained so far regarding teaching and learning systems

categorized in relation to the perspectives of teachers, students, and parents? The question went on to ask please include the range of challenges identified in relation to the following: from the perspective of teachers, what the response was? There is mixed feedback from parents and students depending on the learning environment in the home and other variables, in addition to the learning environment at home prior knowledge and language capability and rate of learning will affect how students grasp lessons and assimilate content whether it is for remote learning or face-to-face lessons. Most teachers reported they have reliable Internet connections, 81.5 per cent secondary, 71.89 per cent primary. Devices in terms of teachers, 82.8 per cent secondary and 76.8 per cent primary. And they were satisfied with the software they were using in terms of 68.2 per cent primary, and 73.2 per cent secondary. However, sustainability, less teachers agreed that their students have reliable Internet service, 34.1 per cent primary, and 35.3 per cent secondary commented on whether the students had reliable Internet. Access to devices, 33.4 per cent primary, and 35.3 per cent secondary. And importantly also because learning environment is important, have a peaceful environment for remote learning, 29.9 per cent primary, and 29.2 per cent secondary.

One of the challenges, of course, facing not only teachers but everyone who has to work from home or work or hybrid in that system was work-life balance, which was one of the challenges facing teachers. Only 35.4 per cent of primary and 41.2 per cent of secondary teachers agreed they were able to maintain a healthy work-life balance.

And to what extent are students grasping lessons and assimilating content? And it was on a scale of— a Likert scale of one being not effective and five being very effective. On average primary teachers gave a rating of 2.9 out of five, where secondary school teachers gave a rating of 3.14 out of five, in terms of how they thought students were grasping and assimilating content on a—[Inaudible]—19 per cent of primary school students which translates in to one in five students disagree that their Internet access at home was good enough for remote learning, 15 per cent of primary school students disagree that they have access to an electronic device for their remote learning. And not only do we see that some students have issues with technology, but also their learning environment 22 per cent of primary school students disagree they have a quiet area to study that is almost a quarter, and 17.2 per cent of primary school students as well as 27.1 per cent of secondary school students disagree they do not do interesting activities during remote learning.

Students also reported socio-emotional challenges with remote learning 51.9 per cent, a little over half of primary school students and 52.1 per cent of secondary school students agree it is difficult to stay focused during their remote learning, and 65.6 per cent of secondary school students agree they were

feeling more stressed than usual.

And finally, when asked to rate the effectiveness of remote learning compared to traditional learning on a scale of one to five, one being not effective and five being effective, the parents of students rated the average effectiveness score at 3.21. Parents felt confident in their ability to support their child academically with 80.1 per cent of students agreeing they are sure they can assist their children in their school work or lessons.

The challenges in terms of technology and environment, 74 per cent of parents agree their Internet access at home is good enough for remote learning, 64 per cent of parents believe they have sufficient devices to support their child in remote learning, and 72.3 per cent of parents agreed they have appropriate areas for their children to study in their houses.

The main challenge parents faced is having to simultaneously manage their children's affairs in addition to their own, 63.1 per cent of parents agree it is difficult for them to balance their own work and their child's learning, and 50 per cent of parents agree that it is difficult to focus on their child's learning when they also have to focus on other needs, and 48.9 per cent of parents agreed it is difficult to keep a study schedule for their child.

So that is just some context for us regarding the Ministry of Education's submission. I would also like to add that we have some data from the Ministries which focused on how many students at school level are currently unable to access the various online learning platforms. ECCE approximately 2,195, the primary level a total of 39,861 students are currently unable to access various online learning platforms. At the secondary school level, 6,909 students. And the data on the estimated number of primary and secondary school students who have never logged on to the portals according to the data supplied by the Education Ministry includes 39,861 at the secondary level, that is the primary level; the secondary level 6,909.

And there are also significant challenges in terms of children with special needs being able to access online learning, and I provided that information so that we can get some context and comparisons based on the various stakeholder groups here in terms of if your experiences and data lines up or aligns with that data as supplied by the Education Ministry, because as we said, this is about finding out about the effects of this system, this hybrid system, and online system of student performance at government and government-assisted schools.

So, we can open the questioning with questions directed at the Education Ministry. Your submissions indicated that due to the prohibitive cost, the Ministry has not acquired software use to monitor test taking however, the Education Ministry is focusing alternative methods of assessment and yet

maintaining the quality of education for students. Please elaborate on the alternative means of assessments referred to and how these alternative means of assessment maintain the quality of education, and by extension assessment for students? So that question to the Education Ministry.

**Mrs. Henry-David:** Mr. Chair, I would let the Director, Curriculum Planning and Development, take that question.

**Ms. Singh:** Good morning everyone.

**Mr. Chairman:** Good morning.

**Ms. Singh:** The concern with respect to test taking using virtual modality would be the requirements to ensure validity and reliability in terms of whether students have access to extra materials, prompts, and so on. What has been happening in the school system at this time would be we are using a combination of submissions with respect to via e-mails, we even have submissions via WhatsApp, and had submissions in print that is delivered to the school. And we are using as well in terms of the online engagement, check lists, the engagement of students as teachers do call out using the charts and so on.

It is a very limited situation realizing that our experience in what is not really a hybrid system, but our attempt to facilitate remote learning, online instruction in the height of COVID has us attempting more preliminary and simple approaches, because to transition to anything sophisticated we did not have the time to train, to expose our teachers. So at this point in time those are the methodologies being used and they vary by year level.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. I would like to hear the TTUTA's response and also the Principals of Public Secondary Schools because you would have had direct interface with the students and also the National Primary Schools Principals' Association and their experience where the assessment systems that have been put in this situation because it is an emergency transition system. It is not by any means what anybody would want, we have to respond as a country and as a state to the pandemic and the restrictions that were enacted to save lives and protect people. But certainly, I think nine months in, we should be at some level assessing where we are, which is what we are trying to do here and growing from the experience.

So if Mrs. Tekah-De Freitas could comment on what the teachers are saying regarding the assessment system, and certainly the Principals of Public Secondary Schools, and then the National Primary Schools Principals' Association. So Mrs. De-Freitas, you first please.

**Mrs. Tekah-De Freitas:** Thank you, Mr. Chair. Mr. Chair, I am glad the representative from the Ministry of Education made the distinction that we are still working in the context of remote learning

as opposed to hybrid learning, because that definitely identifies some of the challenges and constraints in terms of student assessment and assessment of performance.

With your permission, Mr. Chair, I would like to ask our Education and Research Officer, Mrs. Lisa Ibrahim-Joseph to elaborate on the figures, the data which we have collected from our members as far as student performance and assessment goes.

**Mr. Chairman:** Absolutely.

**Mrs. Tekah-De Freitas:** Okay. So I hand over to Mrs. Ibrahim-Joseph.

**Mrs. Ibrahim-Joseph:** Thank you. Good morning, Mr. Chairman, good morning to the members of the Committee, good morning to our listening and viewing public. So, Mr. Chairman, we surveyed around 2,315 of our members and in our enquiry into the kinds of assessment strategies that are used, our responses identified a range of strategies.

The respondents are over 1,700 so we are still tabulating and extrapolating the data by levels. What I can share with you though is that the vast majority of those engaged in online teaching and learning in the virtual classrooms used a combination of quizzes and projects using the platforms that we are available to them, so that, many of the teachers used other platforms beside that of the Ministry. They engaged platforms like Zoom, Google Classroom, MS Teams, where they used Google Classroom they would have administered their quizzes via things like Google forms. A number of them also indicated the use of game-based learning applications such as Kahoot, in order to assess students.

The issue raised by the representative from the Ministry of Education surrounding reliability and validity of the assessment is one noted by the association as well, because we note that in the absence of a formal system that exercises controls over the ways in which these assessments strategies are administered, it is really very difficult to ascertain whether it would in fact yield a reliable information on student performance.

**Mr. Chairman:** I am glad you raised that point and I am going to add this to the question moving on to Mrs. Sherra Carrington-James of the Association of Principals of Public Secondary Schools and also pitching it back to the Education Ministry as we traverse these nine months into the future and how if we are moving to standardize the assessment given the range of assessment modalities as articulated by the Ministry, and I understand that anyone with any reasonableness would understand that well when this started emergency situations would have had to be implemented because it is a pandemic. But certainly nine months in, has there been any standardization of the assessment modes across forms, across schools, because if X school is assessing based on one modality and Y school is assessing based on other modality, how are we standardizing those results on a national level? I will

go to Mrs. Carrington-James and then Mr. Mottley and then back to the Education Ministry, and then we will open the floor to members of the Committee to peruse this topic even more. So Mrs. Carrington-James please.

**Mrs. Carrington-James:** Okay, thank you very much, Mr. Richards, Sen. Richards. The secondary school association, I want to put this up front, does not have the resources to do the kinds of research TTUTA mentioned 1,700 responses, so we do not have the resources to do that kind of in-depth analysis and therefore I hesitate to give figures because whatever I am going to contribute this morning to add clarity would be anecdotal. So I want to put that upfront even in the timeframe in which we were invited to be part of this particular stakeholder initiative and to give clarity from that perspective we would not have had time.

So this is an attempt to cover the entire gamut of the country in a very purposive way whoever was available and that is the feedback that I am given. So, in the context of assessment we have tried across our fraternity to ensure that we stick to one particular platform in any particular school, maybe a variant of two. But certainly the standardization within that school which happens if even we are in the building, there is no standardized practice of how we do assessment in building either, in brick and mortar. So when we come here to the platform it would only be accentuated. What we did as an association in our fraternity most of us would have tried to ensure that if we are using Zoom and Google Classroom, that across the board in that school that is what obtained.

I would suggest though that to mitigate some of the variabilities across schools if we stuck to what we intended to which is to standardize our rubrics for assessment, which especially in the upper school is dictated by the CXC syllabus, and we stick to content analysis then the variability of cross platforms is not impactful. So if I am looking at the content whether the child is giving me a video or the child is giving me a poem and I am looking for the content in there I can still reliably assess that. And that is the key that we have emphasized across our fraternity.

We also used the time as a resource to ensure that given the online modality it was the child's authentic work, whatever it was. So if we restrict a time, synchronous assessments then the parent would not have had the time to look over the shoulder and maybe give input. And so, we use time as a restrictive factor to ensure that there was some element of authentic response coming from the student. We did see it coming out sometimes in the language department, the Google translate and so on and the teachers would see that.

The cost of having software as the Ministry said, to monitor students like Exemplify, some of these things are very, very costly. Therefore, we would have invested our time in terms of character

development and moral suasion and interacting with our parents to understand that look, you are not helping the child, if he or she is able to give us good, bad, or in between a response that is authentically his or hers, we can then develop, grow, and move with that. We can work with the child then.

So, in a nutshell for us it was the standardization within schools limiting the platform, restricting time, synchronous assessments and this term it helped because the Ministry would have prescribed that we do formative assessments. So those little nuggets as well allowed us to assess whether children were indeed engaging, whether they were learning, whether the feedback was indeed positive, and whether the teachers could then move on.

So I would leave that there for now.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. Let us go to Mr. Mottley.

**Mr. Mottley:** Yes, good morning once again and thank you for the opportunity. So, just to take off from the last speaker, we did—it is a little bit more challenging in the primary school for us to do the kind of assessment that is required especially within the given context. As a matter of fact, we employed a wide range of strategies that would incorporate both online and both paper-based packages. As you would have indicated in your preamble, some 39,000 that is close to 40,000 of our students would not have been able to have access to online connectivity. So they would have had to use the packages format, and as you would perhaps know that it is very difficult to teach at the primary level, to teach concepts and to engage our students using packages.

And it is also challenging as well in the virtual environment because you have prompts, you have the parents who might be prompting the children and so reliability and validity of the test would be compromised. So we did of course use the formative assessment mode but even within that, reliability and validity of assessments would have been compromised.

But nonetheless, at the primary level the focus really is about getting—especially at this time—our children, our students involved to participate and that too is very challenging at the primary level. Remember our primary school students are not as independent a learner as it is perhaps maybe in the other level. So you really want to get the children to participate and so, exam conditions would not apply. The time would not apply strictly so giving to the student time to do a test, and so on. That would have been, you know, reduced somewhat again to allow the students to be able to participate.

**Mr. Chairman:** Just a response from the Education Ministry and then I would open the floor to members of the Committee to ask questions on the particular issue. So Education Ministry, could you respond to the standardization? If we have moved in that direction? And as I said before, and I want to make it very clear, this is not about assigning blame as opposed to finding information that can help

improve the situation regarding our young learners. The country, like every other country, has had to respond on their pandemic conditions—not in my lifetime have I ever had to go through this—so I think credit has to be given for what has been done so far. But certainly, finding out what has been done and where the gaps lie, will contribute greatly to improving the situation moving forward because we do not know how long we would be under these conditions going forward. So can the Education Ministry officials please give us a sense of how the grades that has been gleaned, I guess, after the lockdown in March of last year into the reopening of the online learning system and compared to previously, and what factoring did happen in terms of the non-standardized assessment versus a standardized assessment and what data presented in that regard?

**Ms. Singh:** To provide some context we need to also understand the role of standardized assessment in the Ministry of Education. Our standardized assessments are really restricted to those for certification and placement. Those are the SEA, the CSEC, the CAPE exam, and then we have those for national school monitoring, the National Test which we have not had in place for a couple of years because we are revamping that, the NCSE which is the one that is done at the end of Form 3, those are for monitoring purposes as well as to get a gauge, an interim gauge of how students are progressing. So those are the roles for standardized tests.

As the other speakers would have indicated the Ministry has focused on continuous assessment and looking at continuous assessment in terms of the development of the students, deriving data and feedback to drive learning and to drive instruction.

**11.00 a.m.**

**Ms. Singh:** And therefore, with regard to the pandemic, guidelines were provided to assist in terms of identifying content to be focused on and to give us suggested assessments that can be done using the online modality, using the options of print and emails wherever possible. I would want to say that the focus of such assessments would tend to therefore lay more in the higher order thinking skills, the applications, as opposed to the low order skills. So that is why projects and opportunities for assessing critical thinking were more what we wanted to emphasize. That would sort of mitigate against the concerns of—for instance cheating and so on where you are just looking at recall. None of it is, as I said, imperfection. All of this is really a hastening of the agenda of the Ministry in terms of what we already had in train, and what we had to attempt to emphasize and prioritize in a shorter time frame. These standardized tests that were conducted were the SEA in 2020, were the CSEC and the CAPE exams and those were conducted on a face-to-face modality, using the pencil and paper assessment and those were managed by CXC in terms of the correction and the producing of the results. That



did not change from prior and so we did not go hybrid online in terms of the standardized assessments. I hope that helps provide some—

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. Did you see a significant change in the performance of the students between the terms subsequent to the restrictions and the move to online, primary and secondary?

**Ms. Singh:** In terms of the standardized assessment?

**Mr. Chairman:** Yes.

**Ms. Singh:** Okay. So we—for the SEA, we noted small changes in terms of really relating to the fact that the children were expecting to do an assessment in April and they now have to do an assessment in June—in August, sorry, and within that timeframe there was a lot of uncertainty as to, when they would attempt it face-to-face. Because of issues of COVID we had to revert back to online. So that bit of trauma, we would want to factor in as one of the considerations. The paper in itself we cannot assess in terms of how students did in terms of the results.

We would have the Assistant Director of Education Research just chime in a little in terms of the results.

**Mrs. Bhagaloo:** So what we had noticed coming out of the SEA examination is that, the means for Mathematics there was a small reduction by about 2 per cent. However, with the English Language Arts, there was a major improvement by about 9 per cent improvement from 2019 to 2020.

The reduction in Mathematics however, it is something that we would—we can compare worldwide, where we have seen that Mathematics is such a subject where the students need to be doing Mathematics regularly and practising Mathematics and this may have been one of the reasons why we saw a little reduction in terms of performance for Mathematics.

**Mr. Chairman:** And as your colleague also said, we have to factor in the disruption—

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Mr. Chairman.

**Mr. Chairman:** Member Indarsingh go ahead, please.

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Chairman, I have heard about from the—yes, and good morning again to all and I have heard from officials from the Ministry of Education speaking about the cost of software as it relates, if I could to recollect correctly, in terms of what is needed in relation to the continuous assessment of students. The Ministry has to purchase or acquire what is called software, for what purpose?

**Mr. Chairman:** I think it is for online assessment.

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Assessment, right. And one of them indicated that it was very costly. Could we be told of the cost that is needed to—because we see that expenditure is taking place all over and I would

hate to think that the Ministry of Education is not pushing to get the necessary finances through Cabinet approval for the acquisition of this specific software that is needed.

**Mr. Chairman:** Mrs. Henry-David, you can go ahead please. Would you be able to give us the average cost of the software?

**Mrs. Henry-David:** Sorry, I am unable to provide that type of information at this time. However, the Ministry at this time is focusing on acquiring devices for our children so that they can actually attend the classes before we look at software for assessment. So, for example, we have had—we have an MOU with the Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago, and we have taken—

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Mr. Chairman, I have a follow-up on this.

**Mr. Chairman:** Yes, not a problem. Go ahead, Mrs. Henry-David.

**Mrs. Henry-David:** Yes, so we have taken delivery of 800 and another 500 devices. Yesterday, we had—a tender committee met to look at tenders for another 350 devices, we have been, you know, we are grateful to our wider—our corporate citizens for providing a number of our students with devices, so that they can indeed attend these online classes. But as the Chairman would have indicated at the beginning, we have quite a number of students who have not been able to access online classes. And therefore, as we go forward, our first line is to provide our students with the devices and the connectivity that they need in order to access classes, because, as all the speakers before would have indicated, the package system is not ideal.

We do not know how long we would be in this mode for. It is the current reality and while, yes, the assessment software is something that we like to look at for the future, we have more immediate needs, which we are striving to satisfy at this point. We have—

**Mr. Chairman:** What is the criterion for distributing devices as the Ministry requires them?

**Mrs. Henry-David:** Okay. So, in the first instance, our devices we are giving the students in examination classes, so that would be Standard 5 and Forms 5 and 6. In addition, we have a means test that has been developed which we will be administering when we acquire other devices from other sources. So, for example, the TATT devices, they are 10,000 and we have just over 9,000 students of Standard 4—Standard 5 sorry, and Forms 5 and 6, who are without devices so, we are looking at catering to those students in the first instance. They are not going to be subject to means test but in terms of the devices that the Ministry is to acquire and as you know, worldwide, there is a run on devices, so it is not as easy to get them in at the time that you would like to. So, we have been subject to 500 by 400 and so as we go forward. As we get those devices, we will be administering a means test and the means test would look at—well, we would have sent to the Committee, the means test but we

are looking at getting information on the children, the financial information of the caregiver, and the number of persons living in the household. And we are looking at whether the household is already in receipt of government grants, and the number of devices and that sort of thing. And we would be able to administer this means test as we go forward. But as I said earlier we are still looking at exam classes.

**Mr. Chairman:** Mr. Indarsingh, member Indarsingh, you have a follow-up question.

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Yes, Chairman, we have been told and we continue to hear and while I am listening to the Acting Chief Education Officer here this morning, we have been told and when I say the country has been told that the—we are about to return or should be returning to what is called a hybrid environment where there will be face-to-face teaching, and I stand to be corrected, by the 8<sup>th</sup> of February by the Minister of Education. But I find it a bit—and I want to be very circumspect in what I am saying here this morning, because we are being told about the emphasis on devices. And we are being told now that the mode or the software for the continuous assessment or online assessment is being placed on the backburner. We are into virtually a year into the pandemic and I find it highly, highly unreasonable that we cannot hear this morning what is the sum of money that is needed through the Ministry of Education to acquire this—

**Mr. Chairman:** I am going to ask the education officials to provide that in writing. Is there any other question you have on the issue?

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Yes, and I also would like this means test because I—we have heard from the Minister of Education about adopting a school. And up till now, the country seems to be in limbo as it relates to how many devices have been donated, given, granted or gifted to the Ministry of Education—

**Mr. Chairman:** Member Indarsingh, if you have a question for information that you would like the education officials to provide, please do that. But the pontification about executive decisions is not what this inquiry about.

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Yes, Chairman, but I would like to put it in the context to—

**Mr. Chairman:** And that is great, we have a particular objective. We have objectives with this enquiry and these officials are not here to answer those questions.

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Well, I would like to know the number of devices that have been acquired by the Ministry of Education under the Adopt-a-School programme, and a total breakdown of how these devices have been distributed so far across the secondary and primary schools of the country. What we are, in terms of what is the shortfall, how much money is needed to meet the shortfall. And in

addition to that, I would like this means test that the officials are referring to, to be properly, properly communicated with the wider citizenry of this country, if it means publication in all the newspapers and so on, so in relation to educating parents who may be in need of devices on behalf of their children.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. So education officials, you have heard the request from member Indarsingh in terms of the breakdown of what standing devices, what have been distributed and the shortfall. Any other members have questions?

**Mr. Forde:** Mr. Chairman, Forde here. Forde here, Mr. Chairman.

**Mr. Chairman:** Yes, go ahead please.

**Mr. Forde:** Yes, again, welcome again, to all the participants in this important JSC. What I would like to find out, Mr. Chairman, is that the Ministry of Education officials have been speaking about the assessment that has been made with regard to the first set of exams that we would have done during the COVID period, which would have been CAPE, SEA and CSEC, right. But again, remember, most of those students would have already been entrained to physical classes prior to the March 2020 shutdown as a result of the restrictions that would have been brought in by the Ministry of Health, right. So again, I am thinking that we may not be in a position to give a true assessment to say what the online classes have been able to effect with regard to our students.

So again, in light of that, right, my important question is to convey I know we have been hearing the numbers, with regard to the number of primary school students, secondary school students, early childhood students that have not been able to access some of the online classes. But in relation to the presentation submitted by the Ministry of Education, the submission indicated that the Ministry of Education has collaborated with the media, *Trinidad Guardian*, 91.1 Talk City and TTT, to create and distribute broadcast educational content for students. This is on pages 9 and 10 of the submission by the Ministry of Education. And in light of that, my question is, what method does the Ministry of Education use to assess the number of students reached and the level of student engagement and content distribution, via those media channels? Because, Mr. Chairman, we are only hearing about the online, not enough devices, not enough tablets, not enough iPhones, but there is also a medium where we are using Guardian media, we are using 91.1 Talk City and TTT. So could the Ministry shed some light on that please?

**11.15 a.m.**

**Mrs. Henry-David:** Okay, yes. Good morning, Sir. The Ministry currently gets anecdotal feedback from parents who would call in to the Early Childhood Division for further direction, and to give their comments and so on. We, at this time, do not have an assessment of the numbers of persons

who are accessing the content via the newspapers, via the radio. But we also have, during this time, while those media are being used, the early childhood children, their parents can access the content on the Ministry's website, on the SLMS and EMIS, and those parents are in contact with their school teachers. The children who are enrolled in private early childhood centres, the teachers at those centres are in contact with the parents. But in terms of the numbers of persons accessing the newspapers and the radio content, I cannot give you a figure at this time. We would look into trying to see how we can quantify that.

**Mr. Forde:** Mr. Chairman, just a follow-up, and I would go on to the other question one time and, again, to the Ministry of Education officials. Again, we are now in January 2021, right, so roughly March will make it one year. Right? So, again, I know you will have your schedules and your timelines, but, again, we as parliamentarians and as also citizens, we would like to be sure that our students are in line to receive the education that they so need. So, as a result of that, my follow-up question would be, again, in your submission, and I quote:

Class checks are conducted by heads of departments, senior teachers, vice-principals and principals to assess the competence of teachers to deliver the curriculum in the hybrid blended learning environment.

And that submission is on page 12. Right? And on there, the question to be answered: What method is used, again, to conduct these class checks? Right? I know you spoke about the parents calling in and so on or students, right? But you have also mentioned that your staff would make these visits. So, again, what method is used to conduct these class checks? And, secondly, what method is used to ascertain the level of competence of teachers to deliver the curriculum using the online learning systems? Can you shed some light there please?

**Mrs. Henry-David:** Okay. So, as with the normal face-to-face classrooms, there are officials within each school who are charged with the responsibility of ensuring that the teachers are carrying out their teaching and learning sessions up to standard. This is translated into the online environment so that the heads of departments, the deans, the senior teachers and so on, those are the persons who are charged with that responsibility within the online environment.

The Ministry is currently collecting data on how that has taken place over the past term. I have before me an unfinished report, which collects data, for example, on how class checks and clinical supervision are conducted and they are asking questions about whether they were random virtual class checks, pre-planned virtual class checks or a combination. I mean, we are even collecting data on whether or not if it did, in fact, happen.

So this, as I said, what I have before me is preliminary data, but at the national level, we had just about 50 per cent of the secondary schools I think it is, saying that they would have done random class checks; another 31 per cent indicating that they did pre-planned class checks; 14 per cent indicating that they did a combination of both and just under 4 per cent indicating that they did not do any. So we are in the process of collecting that data. As I said, this is preliminary, so we are not in a position to send it to you all as yet. But we recognize the need to ensure that we check our systems, that we ensure that our standards are kept and we at the core of the Ministry are, and have been taking steps, to ensure that teaching and learning is done to certain standards and that the checks are carried out.

**Mr. Forde:** One last question follow-up, Mr. Chairman. And, again, I hear you, Madam CEO, but keep in mind with the international news, right—the UK, Canada, many countries are going on further shutdowns, right—closing of their borders as the case may be—and we are saying come February 08<sup>th</sup> we want to have this pilot project where we would like some of our students to go out. The possibility exists between now and the February date, that may not happen. So just in the event of it not happening, I think your Ministry needs to sort of set some adequate timelines to ensure, that listen, these reports are completed so that the Government of Trinidad and Tobago will have a good idea and a good picture as to where we stand and to know where we will go as we go further in to 2021. Thanks, Mr. Chair.

**Mr. Chairman:** Mr. Mottley, you had a comment? Mr. Mottley?

**Mr. Mottley:** Yes. Well, just to answer the question raised by member Forde about how are teachers at schools monitored. We did, of course, try to collect some data on how that is done and the responses have been that routine class checks or sit-ins are done in the live online or live support chats for observations. How do we ensure that students are learning anything? Well, of course, we do all questioning. We question our students. We look at the students' work, the work that they would have produced to determine if anything is being done at all. So we are looking at pupil performance data. We, of course, review teachers' assessment. This is on the principal side by the way. We review teachers' assessment, planning and written feedback to pupils. And these are just some of the methods that we have been adopting at the primary level to ensure the quality of education, notwithstanding the environment is not the ideal one.

**Mr. Chairman:** All right. I am just going to ask two questions that we have received from the public.

**Mr. Forde:** Thanks for that information, Chair.

**Mr. Chairman:** Sorry?

**Mr. Forde:** No, I just said thanks for that information.

**Mr. Chairman:** Yes, thank you. We are going to pose two questions from the public and then we would move to member Monroe and his question. And the first question is: Can the Ministry of Education indicate whether there is going to be any attempt to continue some aspects of extracurricular activity in schools? And also, why does the Ministry of Education propose not to use the means test in distributing its current stock of donated devices? So, I do not know if the Ministry has answers to those questions.

**Mrs. Henry-David:** So, I would take the last question first. We, in terms of the agreement we have with TATT, we said we will start with children who are in need, and we felt that our examination students are most needy at this time. However, the means test will take a while in order to activate and to work and so to ensure that the children who are subject to it get a device.

We took some time to develop the means test in the first place. So, therefore, we could not wait until we had an active means test in order to start providing our children with the devices that they need in order to access teaching and learning. In terms of extracurricular activities, the Ministry of Health is who dictates, especially with the larger, you know, things like the team sports and so on. We bow to their superior knowledge on this issue.

**Mr. Chairman:** Generally, on the guidelines on interaction and congregation, so we understand that.

**Mrs. Henry-David:** So this is where we are at this time.

**Mr. Chairman:** Mrs. De Freitas has a question and then we will go to member Monroe and his question. Mrs. De Freitas.

**Ms. Tekah-De Freitas:** Mr. Chair, TTUTA actually had two observations to make; one as far back as the Committee member Indarsingh's contribution on the software and devices. So I do not know if you will permit that.

**Mr. Chairman:** Yes, please go.

**Ms. Tekah-De Freitas:** It had to do with the issue of supervision. So, I will ask my colleague, Mr. Roberts, to speak to the issue of the devices and the software and what our experience in our reports has been and then to Mrs. Ibrahim-Joseph for supervision.

**Mr. Roberts:** Mr. Chairman, thanks for having me. In terms of the devices and the software, well noting the response from the Ministry, we would have realized that the Ministry is trying to touch as many areas as possible. However, it needs to be more in-depth. So, in terms of the curriculum guide that was also mentioned and went out, it needed curriculum officers to then massage that guide with the teacher and not just send a guide, so that teachers will now have to pull out and say how best they could implement. We know that some curriculum officers would have made themselves available to

assist teachers, but it would not have been in-depth. So, a lot of the areas would have just been touched. So we are trying to provide some laptops so we cover some of that area. We are trying to provide some of the software. We mentioned that the software would have been costly.

In terms of the AutoCAD, for example, for technical drawing, that is something critical. So it is not that we supply some things in some of the areas is to just tick a box. We needed to be more in-depth so that we will be able to be as effective as needed. We do understand that things are time-bound and we want to not leave any particular area lagging, but just touching the areas would not be sufficient.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. Member Monroe, you are next please.

**Mr. Monroe:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Good morning to all members of the panel, viewing and listening public. My question is a two-part question this morning, based on the submission that indicates students' absence is a major issue in the online learning environment. To the representative of the National Primary Schools Principals Association: The first part, what are some of the reasons given by parents or guardians for their children or charges being absent from online classes? And also, please provide recommendations for reducing students' absence in the online learning environment.

**Mr. Mottley:** Yes, member Monroe, well, I am not too sure how widespread it is in terms of students' absence. We do have, however, yes, I had indicated some time ago that there are some students who have not made themselves available at all at the primary level, but our research showed that it is a very small number. That is one. So, there are some students who have not showed up at all, and then there are those who are absent, just as in the traditional classroom environment.

**Mr. Chairman:** Well, member, if I can interject, Mr. Mottley, according to data supplied by the Education Ministry amounts to 39,861 students have never logged on.

**Mr. Mottley:** Okay. So that perhaps would be for students who do not have access to online, but remember at the primary level, we engage our students both using those who are able to online and, of course, packages. As a matter of fact, quite a large number of our students of schools use the packages which is another issue that we would have to address, perhaps a little later on. So, I am not too sure if that number reflects those students who have not accessed online or accessed education at all. But I am saying that there are some students, whether it be packages or whether it be online, perhaps, it is a small number, based on the information that we got that who have not made themselves available at all, whether it be again, packages or online. But we also have, in the general scheme of things, yes, we do have absenteeism, and the responses that we get—that is both online as well as packages—from time to time is that parents, they have to work. They have no one to supervise their children. They do not have the resources to ensure that their children do the work, whether it is



packages or come online. And so, those present some unique challenges during this particular context, this particular environment, which would exacerbate the absenteeism in our schools. He asked about—

**Mr. Chairman:** Put a pause there, Mr. Mottley. Can I ask a question of the Education Ministry? Is there a collaboration between yourselves and the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services in terms of this kind of data that is being presented by the Education Ministry, and the comment of Mr. Mottley on providing some sort of assessment and support to those families who have these challenges?

**Mrs. Henry-David:** At this time, we have referred a lot of those children to our internal Student Support Services Division and, you know, in our first meeting of this year, the Minister, you know, shone a spotlight on these children who are not being reached. So it is, you know, our intention to look more closely and see how we can collaborate with all and any stakeholders in order to ensure that these children are reached.

The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, for example, was part of the team to develop the means test, and we would have also collaborated with them in terms of the provision of the food hampers, and we continue to work with them. But it is our intention to look, more closely, at those children who for whatever reason, may not be accessing whether it is the online education or the packages. And, as I said, internally, we have referred them to our Student Support Services, but we know that we have not, thus far, been able to reach all of them, and we are going to go forward seeking to ensure all of our children are—

**Mr. Chairman:** While I take your point—

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Chairman?

**Mr. Chairman:**—nine months in, that is quite a large cadre of students who are falling behind. They are almost a year behind now, and many of those students and those families would have had challenges pre-COVID. Mr. Mottley, you can continue.

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Chairman, just before Mr. Mottley continues, I heard again the Acting Chief Education Officer indicate that these students have been referred to their internal support systems within their representative schools, I would gather. Can you provide how many of these students, and in relation to give a breakdown in terms of the education districts?

**Mr. Chairman:** Your mike is muted, please unmute your mike. It is still muted, Mrs. Henry-David. Thank you.

**Mrs. Henry-David:** Sorry about that. We will be able to provide that information in writing.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. And Mr. Mottley?

**Mr. Mottley:** Yes, thanks once again. Let me tell you, one of the realities that we have to face is that quite a number of our households, families who, particularly in low-socioeconomic environment, their focus is not really on education, especially at this time. This time it is about ensuring their livelihood, ensuring their households, and so they are going to take, if they have an option, the option would be to try to make a dollar to feed their children rather than trying to ensure that their children are online. I mean, I have heard parents say to me that, listen, I need to go out there and feed my family. I do not have the time to spend with my child and that is a reality. The COVID-19 experience would have exacerbated that. So we have to accept that. But let me also—

**Mr. Chairman:** Actually, I disagree with you. We do not have to accept that. We have to acknowledge it and do something about it, and that is why I asked the question about the collaboration with the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, because if we accept that we will be perpetuating a cycle of issues down the road.

**Mr. Mottley:** Correct, correct. You are right. We need to acknowledge it and we need to do something about, and we need to do something about it urgently because as you noted and a few others have noted, that we are closing into a year during this pandemic, and other measures should have been put in place to ensure that all of our families or many of our families have not fallen off the grid, so to speak.

The recommendation, member Monroe on how to treat with it, we need to accelerate the plans by the Ministry of Education, on the one hand, to furnish every child with a device. We need to accelerate that plan, but not just a device, because we have people who do not have access to Internet. So we need to ensure that the devices come with some level of Internet connectivity. And I want to say, particularly in very rural communities, south-eastern district and north-eastern area, in those very far removed communities where they are not served by any Internet providers at all, we need to take that into consideration. So the Ministry of Education needs to be in collaboration with the service providers to determine those areas that are outside of the Internet connectivity infrastructure reach and to treat with that. But then that should have been done as well, I think, a long time ago. I am not too sure if the Ministry has—

**Mr. Chairman:** To be fair if I could just interject here, we have a submission that the Education Ministry and TATT and TSIT have engaged in a collaboration to provide ICT and even devices and SIM cards with a three-month Internet package to selected students. To date, 800 devices have been given to schools for distribution to parents in these vulnerable areas. I know a lot more needs to be

done, but I just wanted to put that on the record in terms of what you are suggesting there. So there is something being done in that regard but, of course, more needs to be done.

**Mr. Mottley:** Yes, indeed. And the learning channel, I need to go there. There needs to be a better coordinated effort between the Ministry of Education and that channel and the schools, so that parents and the schools, there will be a synergy among all of these entities and so that we can, perhaps, direct our students and the parents can direct their children to these learning channels or the learning channel, so that they can supplement and reinforce what is being done in the classroom. One advice is that there needs to be a timetable and if there is, that timetable needs to be shared with the schools and with parents.

**Mr. Nakhid:** Mr. Chairman, I would like to interject.

**Mr. Chairman:** Go ahead, please.

**Mr. Nakhid:** I think Mr. Mottley was referring to students in remote areas who were not served by Internet connectivity. Now, you referenced the submission and you stated that—I do not know if you meant it intentionally—but that submission was related to that what Mr. Mottley said. But in the submission itself it says: “For distribution to parents of the selected students.” Now, that has nothing to do with students who were in remote areas as referenced by Mr. Mottley. So my question would be: How were these students selected? What criteria was selected based on—

**Mr. Chairman:** Could you repeat the question, member Nakhid.

**Mr. Nakhid:** Hello?

**Mr. Chairman:** Member Nakhid, could you repeat your question?

**Mr. Nakhid:** Yes. Mr. Mottley referenced students who were not or did not have access to Internet connectivity, and you referenced the submission 5, in the Issue Papers where you said to date that collaboration between the Ministry of Education, TATT, TSTT and Digicel—you referenced that and you said that 800 devices would have been delivered to schools for distribution, but you did not mention to parents of the selected students. You referenced that in connection with what Mr. Mottley said as related to students who were in remote areas, not served by connectivity. Am I correct?

**Mr. Chairman:** Yes, but the submission was from the education Ministry and not the National Primary Schools Principals Association. So I do not think Mr. Mottley will be able to answer that.

**Mr. Nakhid:** No, no, it is not a question for Mr. Mottley.

**Mr. Chairman:** I understand. I understand your comment.

**Mr. Nakhid:** Yes, you understand my comment. I am saying that he referenced remote students, but you referenced the submission that relates to parents of selected students after that collaboration.

There is no link between the two. So I am still waiting to hear how do we have some kind of connect instead of a disconnect with those students in remote areas. I think Mr. Mottley referenced—

**Mr. Chairman:** I understand your question. So I guess we will pose that question to the Education Ministry officials.

**Mr. Nakhid:** Exactly.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you, member Nakhid.

**Mrs. Henry-David:** Mr. Chairman, as I indicated earlier, the TATT devices with the connectivity we are targeting, in the first instance, our children in exam classes, be they in rural areas or be they in inner-city areas where they may be equally disadvantaged. So this is where we are at this time. We have since during the lock down between March and now, we have had discussions with TATT and other service providers trying to get connectivity in those areas where there is none. Part of the agreement with TATT for these devices says that we need to do surveys which we have drafted, and once more of the devices are out there we will administer. But it also collects information on connectivity as well. But service providers, the Internet service providers, are well aware of what are the geographic areas that are underserved in terms of connectivity, and we continue to have conversations with them to see how we can ensure that all of our children, as I said, whether in remote districts or otherwise, are served.

**Mr. Chairman:** Mrs. Carrington-James, I will go to you and then I will go to member Indarsingh for his Issue Paper question.

**Mrs. Carrington-James:** Thank you very much, Chair. The point I wanted to inject here why I raised my hands was that some of our students, especially in the secondary schools of which I can speak, would have not been accessing the online environment, not picking up packages because of the same socio-economic factors that we are talking about, they have gone out to earn an income. So I just wanted to put it there in terms of those who are not coming on. There is a cadre of students, a group of students, who we have lost, who I am sure even when we go back to the building, in brick and mortar, it will be a challenge to get them back. The reason for that, of course, is economics. It demands that they go out and work.

I feel though that if we were a little bit more sensitive to the sterile nature of the platform, that the thrust to simply give students devices would have been supported with a more humane reach out to parents, to let them understand the value of the initiative that we are doing. So, I just wanted to put that in there and then to add that there are some stakeholder agencies that have come on board with our schools to give us the support to reach some of these students.

In addition to the deans and the SSD, the Student Support Services and so on, we have agencies, and I would just draw out one. There is a Prince Charles Trust, PTI Trust that has come in and offer their support through VCTT, the Volunteer Centre of Trinidad and Tobago. We have gotten some good stakeholders on board and I thought I would want to put that out there, that there are some who are assisting us in reaching some of these students who because of their socio-economic issues cannot come onto the platform.

And the last comment I would make on this is, I heard you and I heard Sen. Nakhid's attempt to emphasize that this is not just about those children who have received the devices. But I want to take it another step and to suggest that just as there are initiatives to give children and homes and families food cards because we recognize that there are students in the home that need to eat, that it is an onerous responsibility on parents to actually pay for the connectivity that you are talking about supplying. So the data that is needed for some of them, yes, they have connectivity, so to speak, on paper, but they cannot afford that sustained data to support the children online. So, just as the food card goes out, maybe there is need for that means test as well and assessment of: Can you afford the connectivity that is available as well?

**Mr. Chairman:** Well I can add to that—

**Mr. Forde:** Mr. Chairman?

**Mr. Chairman:** One second, member Forde. Before I go to member Indarsingh, because he has been standing by, but one of my concerns is simply this. I am surprised that the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Social Development would not have data on vulnerable families, particularly in rural areas, because COVID did not invent those vulnerabilities. COVID exacerbated them. So I am surprised we have to do so much testing and surveying. We should, by now, I am presuming, given the mandate of the Education Ministry and the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, in various iterations, to use data scans on a national level, because we should have that information about vulnerable families already, because they would have been more than likely vulnerable before the pandemic. I mean, I agree with you to target them, in the first instance, while we do these scans as opposed to waiting for a survey to identify them while they continue to miss out. And that is my concern, at this stage that we still, from what we are all saying, are not addressing those vulnerable families who have bread and butter issues that they will tend to first—if you look at Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, food first before education. So I am surprised we have not dealt with that situation more effectively. Member Forde and then member Indarsingh.

**11.45 a.m.**

**Mr. Forde:** Yeah, Mr. Chair, again to follow up with Mrs. Carrington-James, the President—Carrington-James, that is the name, right, Mr. Chair?

**Mr. Chairman:** Yes.

**Mr. Forde:** Yes, to follow up on that, in terms of the students that we may be possibly losing, who may now go on to probably employment or whatever, as she would have mentioned, the thing about it is that I have two daughters, they went through the secondary school system and back then they had mobile phones. The average secondary school student, I think, has a mobile phone in that it had even reached to the stage where principals had to put measures in place and restrictions in order to—you have to log in your phone on mornings, you cannot go to the classroom with the telephones, and so on.

So they may have the devices to do other things. But now devices, in order to go on an online education, priority is one we think we need to look at. Again, in terms, you know, the information she gave us in terms of statistics, any survey, any sort of information that she may need to give that, you know, if they did any little surveys in order to ascertain the numbers, the amount of students; that is one, and then we are also talking about connectivity in rural areas. Again, there is an institution called PingTT, presently they are coming to the Tunapuna constituency in order to go to community centres to set up wireless connection whereby we want to introduce where persons can come on an evening or during the day, keeping their social distancing, whether in the car park, whether inside the building, whether in the surroundings in order to get through.

So again, we may not need to give connectivity to every home in a rural district of Mayaro, Moruga, as the case may be, but we may be able to go to one particular location, a community centre, an activity centre, set it up and these people can come, socially distanced, and participate if possible. So I would like you to shed some light there, please.

**Mr. Nakhid:** Chairman, Chairman, before we go to Rudy—hello?

**Mr. Chairman:** I would ask you to standby, member Nakhid, because it is a pretty long question and I do not want the respondent to lose focus on the question. Let the respondent answer first and I will come to you.

**Mr. Nakhid:** Okay.

**Mr. Chairman:** Mrs. Carrington-James.

**Mrs. Carrington-James:** All right. Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, again. Member Forde, I had said upfront, and maybe it is something, it is not to be ventilated here, for us to look into the role of

the principals' association. It is a volunteer organization and maybe we need to be seconded and go to CPO and get that kind of, you know, strength so that we could collect the kind of data that would inform these processes. So a president and a secretary who is on here today, we do not have that resources to collect that data. So do we have any figures, yes, we do, and I am saying again, it is anecdotal.

What we have that tells us the number, it is somewhere in the vicinity of 10 to 12 per cent. What does that say? It is the few schools that we are able to reach. That is a lot of students anyway. If I have a population of 300 children, then 30 children going out to work and with the potential of not returning to school is 30 children too many. The value and the priority put on education is something, like I am saying, there must be a softer reach as we give them the hard devices that say, "We need you online", there must be that shoring up of education is a value as well. Sen. Richards—

**Mr. Forde:** Who sets the priority there, Madam? Who will set the priority there in terms of the student going out to work versus staying at home with a device?

**Mr. Chairman:** Member Forde, first of all, students under 16, they cannot work, that is illegal. Let us start with that, so let us put that on the table as if—

**Mr. Forde:** Right. Fair enough, Mr. Chairman.

**Mr. Chairman:**—it is a normal illegal thing. So we do not want to be propagating that students going out to work is a normal—that is something to be dealt with. And also you mentioned an issue of average students. I do not know that the target we are talking about are average students from average families. They are vulnerable groups that we are discussing in this particular instance. We have to move the conversation along. Member Nakhid and then member Indarsingh, please. Can you unmute, member Nakhid?

**Mr. Nakhid:** Yes. Okay. Thank you, Chair. Well, first of all, to madam Carrington's points—hello? Hello?

**Mr. Chairman:** We are hearing you. Go ahead, member Nakhid.

**Mr. Nakhid:** Yes. To madam Carrington's point, now there is what we would like as the ideal and what we would like as the reality of Trinidad and Tobago. I think what she referred to, MP Forde, was the actual reality on the ground when it comes to phones. Now you spoke about principals and so taking the phones from the students so that they cannot have access to phones in the school, but you have to remember in a lot of our society, especially in the underserved communities, a lot of these students do not have data usage. They do not have a data package. They have their phones primarily for phones, and so, and—sorry—for cameras; to have a camera service.

So they do not really have that data usage that madam Carrington is referring to that they can access online learning; that is one. And two is, you cannot compare a place like Tunapuna, a town like Tunapuna, with remote areas in the south of the country. And so where you talk about somebody come in and putting on and setting up some kind of connectivity for students to come there and have a communal platform. If you go down—if you are familiar with when you go down to south, you go down to Moruga/Tableland, you go down to Claxton Bay and so on; you go into some of these rural communities, students cannot come to one common area and have that kind of connectivity.

So it is like night and day as to what you are suggesting. Although it is a good suggestion, it is just not the reality on the ground. And I think that is what was meant by the lack of connectivity, or I think that is what madam Carrington was referring to. So it might sound ideal but as a matter of fact it is ideal but it is not the reality on the ground, both in terms of data usage and in terms of the actual ability or capacity for our remote students in remote and rural areas to have that access or have that Internet connectivity.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you, member Nakhid. I am going to go to Mrs. Henry-David and then Ms. De Freitas and then member Indarsingh for his issue paper question. And we have to move on with the conversation because we just have 45 minutes left.

**Mrs. Henry-David:** Chair, I just wanted to say that the Ministry of Education has a longstanding relationship with the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services whereby students who are on social welfare in the normal scheme of things, they are required to have their paperwork signed off by their respective principals on a termly basis. And in the context of COVID, as early as April, the Ministry of Education would have provided information to the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services which would have resulted in the provision of food cards.

We understand also that the COVID-19 situation is fluid, so parents who may have been employed in April or in September may now find themselves on the breadline. So as it is fluid we need to continue to collect information in this regard and to continue to collaborate. Thank you.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. Ms. De Freitas.

**Ms. Tekah-De Freitas:** Thank you, Chair. Listening to the questions that have been put this morning and the positions proffered, TTUTA wants to suggest, Mr. Chair, and to Committee and to the Ministry, that what we need to consider is not simply the matter of provision of devices and connectivity and so, but a more macro approach in terms of resilience planning within our education system whereby we look not only, as I said, at devices, but we look at developing socio-emotional learning amongst parents, educators and students where we look at training and development of our



educators; where we look at, as was suggested, partnering with different agencies, both ministerial and non-ministerial, to treat with issues, because we are talking here and it appears we are focusing mainly on primary and secondary students.

Perhaps we need to also remember, Chair, that we have our ECCE students, our special needs students, and our students at tertiary level who are also caught up in this whole situation and are struggling to various extents. Thank you.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you, Ms. De Freitas. Let me just for public information, we are having a second enquiry where we are dealing with denominational boards, the discussion on these groups and also in some instances tertiary level. So they are not left out of our catchment in terms of gaining information. Mr. Indarsingh, go ahead.

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Thank you very much, Chairman. And I really, in attempting to move along the conversation, I found that the remarks of the President of TTUTA is spot on as we go forward. And as we go forward and I continue to hear points that are being made and information which is coming to us, before I go to the question that I want to focus on, Chairman, I would like the Ministry as they collaborate with the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services to take on board. Because as a Member of Parliament I have heard in the past that because you are in a particular household, if a person is getting a grant from the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services they are denied accessibility to certain entitlements or benefits that are supposed to be dealt with from a vulnerable point of view. And I hope that in this means test which has been conceptualized and so on, that if a person within the family structure is receiving some grant from the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services it will not debar a vulnerable child and so on from benefiting from a device under the Adopt-A-School programme.

**Mr. Chairman:** Member Indarsingh, point noted. I agree with you—[*Inaudible*] policy decision. Let us move on to the issues, please, this issue.

**Mr. Indarsingh:** And I would want to ask the Ministry officials, have they been engaged or how they have been focusing on evaluating and assessing the performance of teachers during the first term of what is called the remote teaching environment?

**Mr. Chairman:** So would Education and then TTUTA on that because I know TTUTA would want to weigh in on that also. Ms. De Freitas is already smiling. Education.

**Mrs. Henry-David:** Yes. So, Mr. Chairman, as I indicated we have the systems in place and the persons within the school system whose duty it is to carry out those assessments of teacher performance, they continue to do their tasks. It is just that it has moved to the online environment.

**Mr. Chairman:** Well, that is an interesting answer that—well, the persons who are supposed to do it are doing it. I think the member wanted a little more detail on that.

**Mrs. Henry-David:** As I would have indicated previously we have a draft document where we have been checking to see what is happening with that. So once we have completed the analysis of the data that we have we would be willing to share that information with you, with the Committee.

**Mr. Chairman:** Could you give us a sense of the framework of that document, please, so that we could get a sense of the framework is being used to assess teacher performance? I am sure at this stage you have that.

**Mrs. Henry-David:** Okay. So we are at the point where we do not wish to burden schools unnecessarily with constant questionnaires and collection of data. However, we recognize that checks to the system are important and we need to analyze the data as we go along. So we have been asking schools a number of questions and some of the questions revolve around the forms of assessment. We looked at the challenges that the schools would have experienced over time.

We looked at the packages and we looked at, among other things, what is happening with the children. We are asking about staff meetings and departmental meetings and whether the school-based management teams would have met. We are also asking about whether there was professional development in order to address the shortcomings that the teachers may have identified. We are looking at whether the teachers access ICT training for example, and that is basically what I am seeing here.

**Mr. Chairman:** Are they in collaboration with TTUTA on this modality for assessment of teacher performance?

**Mrs. Henry-David:** Not that I am aware of, Sir.

**Mr. Chairman:** Do you not think that—*[Inaudible]*

**Mrs. Henry-David:** We meet with TTUTA very often, and as you said earlier, I am sure TTUTA will—they are not shy in giving their opinions on if it was suggested.

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Chairman—

**Mr. Chairman:** I would prefer or understand that collaboration before a public hearing explanations that would be more constructive. But, TTUTA, go ahead, please.

**Ms. Tekah-De Freitas:** Chair, thank you. TTUTA has advocated that what happened in the physical space pre COVID should not simply be transposed into the virtual realm. With that in mind we have suggested that issues such as monitoring and assessment or monitoring and evaluation, supervision of teachers, is something that would need to be discussed with TTUTA as the representative majority

union based on the nature of those particular processes. I will like to ask our Education and Research Officer to elaborate on the issue of monitoring and supervision of teachers at this time as took place over the last few months, with your permission.

**Mr. Chairman:** Yes, go ahead, please.

**Ms. Tekah-De Freitas:** So Mrs. Ibrahim-Joseph. Thank you, Sir.

**Mrs. Ibrahim-Joseph:** So with regard to the issue of monitoring and evaluation the process that is recommended by the Ministry of Education and to which TTUTA in principle has no objection is that of clinical supervision and clinical supervision is supposed to be a developmental process. It is stated in the Ministry's document and that is what it is, however, historically and based upon matters with which the Association has had to treat with for our members, there has been a punitive mindset in terms of the way in which this process had been managed. And so going forward we would like to reiterate the position that engaging in clinical supervision as a mechanism for managing and appraising teacher performance has to be a collaborative endeavour between those who are charged with the responsibility of supervising and appraising the teacher and the teacher himself or herself, and it cannot be a process in which the supervising officer simply turns up in the moment.

It has to be pre-planned because there are objectives that need to be set and teachers are assessed on those and therefore recommendations for improvement going forward are mutually arrived at by the parties involved. And so we want to advocate that if this is going to be used then that is the position that must be adopted, but there must be some collaboration between the Association and the Ministry on how this would be rolled out, particularly in this environment which we all recognize is fluid. And if we are really honest with ourselves—the members keep referring to the fact that we have been into this, nine months into almost a year, but if we are truly honest with ourselves a lot of it is being made up as we go along. And we have got to the stage where we have to stop making up, but we have to engage in true and meaningful collaboration, not provide information/consultation; meaningful collaboration with members—

**Mr. Chairman:** I agree with you that it is taken by collaboration. I do not like the inference of making it up as we go along because I do not think that may be fair to the Ministry and, yes, everybody is adapting as we go along so let us kind of keep it civil. Member Indarsingh, you have some follow-up questions and then member Avinash Singh, please.

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Yes, Chair. And again I would like to hear as it relates to from the Ministry and any other stakeholder who is willing to make their input, consideration that very little monitoring can be done for students who receive packages, is the work that is being returned represents an accurate

representation of the student's ability?

**Mr. Chairman:** Education.

**Mrs. Henry-David:** As indicated earlier, there is no real way of getting a true picture with respect to the returned packages. Representatives from the principals' association would have indicated the possibility of parents assisting students with the work that is done. So it is what it is and this is why we want to ensure that we can move on from those printed packages as best as possible, but we continue to engage with those students through those packages in lieu of any other way of reaching them.

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Chairman, could I find out too as it relates, as we continue to zero in on this printing of packages, the number of schools that are not outfitted with what we would call, high-volume printers and copiers, and so on.

**Mr. Chairman:** That is a good question because my understanding, and it has been in the public domain and in the media that many principals and teachers have to use their own—

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Resources.

**Mr. Chairman:**—and resources to print in some instances.

**Mrs. Henry-David:** With respect to a high volume all schools would have printers. As to whether they are high volume, I am not in a position to indicate. We would of course imagine that schools would have some more and some less volume in terms of the amount of printing printed packages that have to be produced, but I am doubtful that, apart from maybe senior comprehensive schools or so would have high-volume printers.

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Mr. Chair, if I could just—

**Mr. Chairman:** [*Inaudible*] Member Indarsingh, one second, please. Can Mr. Mottley comment on that printing issue and also Mrs. Carrington-James?

**Mr. Mottley:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Yes, indeed, there are a number of our primary schools that are without printers. So let us start there. And also, photocopier, copies, right, and also those schools that have photocopiers, we do not have the funding to maintain them. And one of the things that we require very often for our photocopiers is toner and we did make that point to the Ministry of Education a while now and we are hoping that by now that the Ministry would have provided the schools with printers, photocopiers with toner but that has yet to be done.

The Ministry has provided, however, photocopying paper, but as you know we need ink and we need toner to put the prints on the photocopying paper. So we are asking for that to be expedited. We are asking for the Ministry to do something about that. We are also asking the Ministry to assist those

schools in particular that do not have photocopiers. And usually there is a correlation between the schools in the very low socio-economic communities and those schools that do not have photocopiers. So you would find that there is a double whammy, so to speak, with respect to the students and the families who are, one, not able to access online, that is on one hand, and who may have to rely on packages, but because the schools are not outfitted with photocopiers they too are disadvantaged. So we are hoping that that is addressed soon. Thank you very much.

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Chairman, based on the pronouncements of Mr. Mottley—

**Mr. Chairman:** One second, Mr. Indarsingh. Let us go to Ms. Patricia Pitt and her response from that from the public secondary schools as the Secretary.

**Ms. Pitt:** Good morning, everyone, and thank you, Mr. Chair. Is everyone hearing me? Yes, you are? Are you hearing me?

**Mr. Chairman:** Yes.

**Ms. Pitt:** Okay, thank you, Sir. This discussion concerning packages, it is very important also to the secondary schools because we have also experienced having packages created at cost because ink, toner, time and not being collected as a consequence of parents because of their various economic positions, not being able to come in at the timing that you may have wanted them to come in. So you have hundreds of packages being created, yes, but packages are there at the school, not necessarily in the children's hands. And following that, the ones that are collected when they are taken home, they are not necessarily brought back in a timely manner. And even if they are brought back you are not certain as to the fact that it is the child's work, just as everyone has said, because, I mean, it was done at home and you do not know who else would have put their thought and their hand into it.

So the packages, it has not really been a very successful or effective method to get our children engaged in this learning environment right now. It has not worked very well.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you very much for that intervention. Member Indarsingh and then member Avinash Singh.

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Thank you very much, Chairman, again. I hope that, based on the pronouncements of Mr. Mottley and also Ms. Pitt, that the Ministry of Education will certainly have the data, because if I listened very correctly we were told that all schools have photocopiers and printers and now we are hearing on the contrary. So I hope that the Ministry will take the appropriate corrective action based on the pronouncement, and to be guided by the data from these stakeholders. And for our students who may have been deemed to cover a lower aptitude and so on and based on the work that is being resubmitted or submitted based on the packages and even from an online point of view, from

a Ministry's point of view are you all on board in relation to what corrective action that is being pursued by teachers from a remedial point of view with respect to the students' work?

**Mrs. Henry-David:** Mr. Indarsingh, I am a little unclear as to the question, sorry.

**Mr. Indarsingh:** I am talking about in terms of the work that is submitted and the integrity of the work and so on, and based on whatever analysis you all are conducting at the Ministry's level and in the compilation of data and so on, are you all working with the teachers in the respective schools to see how best they are addressing the issue of remedial work based on the state of play that you all are accessing or the deficiency?

**Mr. Chairman:** In terms of student performance, that is what you are talking about?

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Yes, in terms of student performance.

**Ms. Singh:** Okay. In our guidelines that we have provided in term one we gave support to the teachers in terms of advice as to how to do a diagnostic. We also provided advice specifically for remediating reading and this is in train with and reiterate what we have been doing by way of initiatives to improve literacy and numeracy. And the curriculum officers have been interacting with schools using virtual meetings, returning emails and phone calls to be able to both give advice to teachers based on their concerns that they have raised. And secondly, to even examine the packages that have been prepared and give advice in terms of how to continue developing those.

We have also engaged them in terms of providing support in relation to how they interpret the curriculum to students, and that advice that we give looks at students within a range of—in terms of a range of achievement levels. In this term, having received the results concerning students who are re-sitting Standard 5 and who have moved on to Form 1 and performed poorly, we have also created—not even created, we are in the process of re-disseminating materials concerning an adaptive curriculum for students with those particular needs. And based on the learning activities that we have developed for primary and secondary, that is well over 1,000 for each level, we have packaged those materials for students. So, for instance, materials for English Language Arts, let us say, that were developed with concepts that were introduced at Standard 1, Standard 2 and Standard 3, we have put those together so that students, where there are deficiencies or gaps too steep, the teacher has a resource that they could refer to.

So we have also created brochures to give teachers advice online on tools that they could access with specific relation to support for the subjects in terms of secondary; and those we are in the process of making available. The links to those resources are already disseminated and these were resources that were disseminated in term one. What we are doing is we are uploading and we are populating and we

will continue to provide both communication via online modality, as I said phones and emails, as well as supporting by providing resources. So within the week we are expecting to provide—circularize a memo to remind teachers of the resources that we have already provided and to give access to further resources that would support now, this targeted group of students in terms of remediation.

**12.15 p.m.**

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. Member Avinash, thank you for your patience. Go ahead please.

**Mr. Singh:** Thank you, and through you, Mr. Chairman, to the Ministry of Education. In going through the submissions, the submissions outlined several assessments methods, hybrid and blended learning environments, such as face-to-face assessments, remote online learning assessments and distance learning assessments.

My question would be, based on the Ministry's preliminary evaluation of the first term of the academic year, which method of assessment proved to be the most challenging for students and/or teachers? The second part of that question would be: What were the unique challenges that emerged in attempting to engage special need students during this period of online training and learning? To the Ministry of Education, please.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you, Mr. Singh.

**Ms. Henry-David:** So the second question had to do with the challenges for the children with special education needs. Correct?

**Mr. Chairman:** That is correct yes.

**Ms. Henry-David:** So in terms of special education needs, some of the challenges we have identified would be the need in many cases for a tactile presence for some of these children. The online modality does not work very well for them. They need hands on. They need to connect with their teachers and their aides and so on, on a hands-on basis.

Some of the other issues that would have arisen would be, as with everybody else, the lack of devices for those who can engage in that modality. We have had instances where the parents who now have to take over the role as the educator, as the main facilitator of education for those children, they have indicated that they have some struggles with interacting with their children in that capacity.

Some of the issues we have had would be the need for training for our teachers in order to engage those students through that modality.

**Mr. Chairman:** The last time we met in the Eleventh Parliament, the Director of Student Support Services which deals directly with students with special needs and disabilities, identified a resource issue, even before the pandemic, and certainly with the pandemic, the need for more funding, and also

a significant increase in students with behavioural issues, emotional behavioural issues. Has the Ministry provided more funding and resources to Student Support Services to deal with these students with special needs?

**Ms. Henry-David:** Mr. Chair, I am not in a position to answer that. I would not want to give an answer that is not correct. My suspicion is that as with everything else, the budgets of all Ministries have seen a reduction rather than an increase, but in terms of specifics, I cannot give specifics. What I can say is that we are attempting, in spite of the financial challenges, we have been, for example, providing training. So that the Blind Welfare would have facilitated training for teachers so that they would be able to engage students with that particular disability under these current conditions. The student aides have been facilitating regardless and due to the fact that they are remote from the students.

**Mr. Chairman:** But what is the Student Support Services telling you in terms of what their needs are in and challenges at this time, even in light of the reduced budgetary allocations and resources? Because Mr. Conrad Dennis I think, I hope—Dennis?

**Ms. Henry-David:** Yes.

**Mr. Chairman:**—was at wits end to deal with the load of the students with special needs and behavioural and emotional problems, and with disabilities, because that is the mandate of that division, if I am not mistaken.

**Ms. David-Henry:** Yes. So they continue.

**Mr. Chairman:** What is the feedback from the division?

**Ms. David-Henry:** What they have been telling us is that they have continued to engage students via online modalities via telephones. They have hotline numbers out there, and they have been attempting to continue to treat with student issues. They have made videos, for example, that can be sent out to schools. For instance, at SEA time they would have done the usual sessions that they have with children in preparation for exams. They would have had those recorded so that they can be sent out to the children via virtual mode, and they continue, regardless of the challenges, to put their best foot forward to serve out there.

**Mr. Chairman:** Do they continue to get an increased number of calls with students with suicidal ideation and behavioural and emotional problems, because of the stressors of the pandemic?

**Ms. David-Henry:** In terms of increasing numbers, I know that they said they have, not necessarily with suicidal ideation, on average of about 15 calls per day with different issues, and that is why they continue to make themselves available via telephone, that people can reach them 24 hours a day. They



continue to engage with the schools and with the parents and students, yes, parent outreaches.

**Mr. Chairman:** And member Singh's first question?

**Ms. David-Henry:** Which was?

**Mr. Chairman:** Member Singh, could you repeat the question please?

**Mr. Singh:** Sure.

**Ms. David-Henry:** Which were the challenges and which was the best modality for engaging the children?

**Mr. Singh:** Yes.

**Ms. David-Henry:** In terms of the draft study that I have here, I am not sure if I have information on that at this point in time. We may have to provide that information for you in writing.

**Mr. Singh:** Through you, Mr. Chair, one more question to the Ministry of Education. In terms of the major challenges experienced in the exam preparation process, I see there are a number of issues that were identified in the submission by the Ministry. I just want to know, how does the Ministry intend to address the challenges for the upcoming school term, and the examinations due in 2021? These submissions could be found on page 22, No. 1(d).

And a follow-up to that question would be: Does the Ministry intend to alter the curriculum or the curriculum delivery of subjects at the primary and secondary school level to allow for more effective and efficient teaching in the remote hybrid learning system? So can we have some clarification on these issues? Thank you.

**Ms. David-Henry:** So with respect to the challenges, one of challenges was absenteeism, which we continue to treat with through our SSSDs, through outreaches by school personnel.

In terms of CXC's response, we, as all other Ministries of Education throughout the region, are in continual discussion with CXC trying to bring home to them the peculiar circumstance of our students in Trinidad and Tobago, whereby we have not had face-to-face teaching and learning since last March. This particular cohort of students would be affected more so than the students who would have sat exams last year. We continue to impress upon them and to negotiate.

I will say, however, that we had the experience last May when we met at a regional level, at the level of the Ministers of Education, and the strategies for the administration of exams were put to the vote. It is one territory/one vote. So that while Trinidad and Tobago may have quite a number of students sitting the examination, our vote only counts as one. So that each territory would be in different circumstances at this point in terms of how much teaching and learning their students have been exposed to face-to-face.

So, therefore, what comes out at the end of the round of discussions, in other words, what the final decision is as to how the exam would be held, when it would be held, what would it comprise of, it may or may not take into consideration the needs of Trinidad and Tobago because it is representative of the region, as opposed to the specific needs of Trinidad and Tobago.

In terms of the CXC Moderators App, they would have provided training to persons on how to properly use this application. We are keeping our fingers crossed and hoping that with respect to devices and Internet connectivity and SBA completion, when our children come out in February, well as long as the Ministry of Health deems it safe for them to come out, they would be able to complete their SBAs in accordance with what CXC now requires.

With respect to the SEA level, we have, in fact, looked at the composition of those examinations, and there has been a change to the examination framework, whereby we have cut back the number of questions in the mathematics and language arts. We have cut back the number of questions, but we have kept the same time frame for students to complain. For this year we have also circulated the type of essay question that would come, it would be narrative. This information has been on the Ministry's website, and has been sent out to schools and other stakeholders.

We have also done a specimen paper, which would have been circulated this month, which captures the format that the exam is going to take come June of this year.

**Mr. Chairman:** Before I go, just some housekeeping. I know we said we would stop at 12.15, but given that we started 15 minutes late, and we still have a couple of issues to get through, the Secretariat has advised that I would be able to go till about quarter to one. So we have about 15 minutes left, and we have to leave room at the end for a roundup of comments from the heads of each of the groups represented here.

So before I go to member Nakhid and his questions, which are coming up next, just as a matter of interest, remember we are dealing with the printing of packages. Can the Ministry identify if some of the issues raised regarding the printing of content, vis-a-vis copyright infringements, have been sorted out by the Ministry, because there is a concern that the Ministry may not have paid—and you can correct me if I am wrong—for commonly collective licences, and teachers who may be copying this content, in some instances may open themselves up to some sort of copyright liabilities?

**Ms. Singh:** We responded to this matter in two fronts. One, we have prepared learning activities, as I mentioned before, for every level. At the primary, every subject at the primary, and forms one to three at the secondary, with some for CSEC and CAPE. Those are ones that we have assured in terms of quality with respect to using open educational resources.

For the teachers, all teachers were invited to be trained by our Teacher Development Unit, through an initiative with COL on open education resources and how to deal with the matter of copyrighting and plagiarism. They have been advised strongly, through these efforts, as to what they are permitted to do and how they can source copyright free resources that are available to them.

**Mr. Chairman:** Okay, thank you. Member Nakhid.

**Mr. Nakhid:** Thank you, Chairman Richards. Before we go, I will continue the question. I think it is very important to stress the reality of the situation. I have heard a lot of idealism and so, but I am dealing with the reality, and our reality is such that there are certain children, students in certain demographic areas that are not being served by our education system, especially in this COVID-19.

**Mr. Chairman:** Member Nakhid, if I could interject. We covered that area in detail already. I really want to move on, because I have a committed time limit.

**Mr. Nakhid:** Chairman, I understand, but it is a particular point—

**Mr. Chairman:** Member Nakhid, we covered it in detail already. Can we move forward please?

**Mr. Nakhid:** Yes, we can, but there is a particular point that was not answered, and you referred to it with the packages. The packages imply that these are students that do not have access to online and MP Indarsingh asked about the lower aptitude and how packages are marked. How do teachers assist these students? And the answer given by the MoE was that there were remedial solutions online. How is that possible? How can we let that pass? This affects students in Success Laventille and students in Bagatelle, and students in Carenage, and that is of importance to us. That is my point. How can—the packages imply that these students do not have—

**Mr. Chairman:** Member Nakhid, could you moderate your tone please.

**Mr. Nakhid:** Okay, moderated. Can I have an answer?

**Mr. Chairman:** Education Ministry, would you like to answer?

**Ms. Singh:** The question we were responding to was how we were providing support to teachers, so that they could engage in remedial services. The remedial services they provide are through a variety of media, be it print, packages or online services. We indicated that our support to the schools are in a variety of ways, and we supported them, either through direct engagement, whether it is in a virtual meeting or through a phone call, whether it is they email information to us and they ask for support, and we have provided, not just in COVID, prior to that training, and how they can engage in remediation, and they design their packages to be mindful of that.

So if the student that they are sending materials to returns responses that suggest that there are gaps in concepts, the concepts are not properly developed, then they would respond accordingly in terms

of how they design their future activities, and give feedback as well on their packages—if we are speaking specifically to packages. So that is the information I can give in terms of our general responses to support remediation. If we are looking at a response through print, then teachers are guided and supported to be able to do that. This is what they are accustomed doing in terms of print in the classroom. They would have given support, corrected children’s work, it just would have been real-time, not delivered and returned.

So it is not that they are not able to do that when they are commonly expected to do feedback and to provide, based on their assessment of where gaps are, or where deficiencies are, to provide now further activities or items of work or mini lessons to be able to help the children in terms of review the concept or deepen their learning.

**Mr. Nakhid:** Thanks for a little more clarity.

**Mr. Chairman:** And thanks for moderating your tone.

**Mr. Nakhid:** Your submission indicated that regards to special consideration given to support students enrolled in schools that are under academic watch or classified as under-performing, the MoE has provided schools with an adapted curriculum in subjects offered in Forms 1 and 2. The adapted curriculum is implemented as required. That is from the MoE submission, page 21, No. 3. First question: What does the adapted curriculum entail? MoE?

**Ms. Singh:** The adapted curriculum provides a different scope in terms of the breadth and depth of what should be covered for a child who is, let us say, performing at under 30 per cent, and we have in the case of Mathematics and English Language Arts, students who are between zero and 10 per cent. So we would have advised on core skills, foundation skills that should be covered, the learning deepened. We would have provided some recommendations on resources as well as strategies. Training would have been provided to support how those students are to be taught using differentiated instructions, manipulators, hands-on approaches or other forms of pedagogy. This was done prior to COVID. So what we have done is we have re-disseminated, and in our interactions with the school we have continued our work, but we are taking it, to some extent—well, not to some extent, in all cases to the virtual landscape, and we have used, as I said, supported with emails, phone calls and so on, because we are not at the school on a face-to-face basis. The teachers are not always at the compound as well, given Ministry’s guidelines.

So this programme to support students is not one that has been developed for the COVID period. It is one that has been in train, and that we continued, and we have increase our support by now providing learning activities, and these highlight the concept. You have then a developmental activity

for the child to be able to interact with the concepts, and then there is a small assessment activity. All the responses, the answers so to speak are provided in the learning activity, and these are packaged and shared using an online link to the schools. So that the teachers have access to support material. The compilation is in such a way that as we provide more resources schools can access them through the same link.

**Mr. Nakhid:** In light of what you just said, how many schools—do you have data as to how many schools are currently implementing this adapted curriculum?

**Ms. Singh:** In terms of the—

**Mr. Nakhid:** The adapted curriculum that you spoke to, how many schools are—

**Ms. Singh:** The information is made available to all schools, but the schools that are targeted are schools who would have received a significant percentage of a population of students that scored under 30 per cent at the formal level, and that number is around 56 schools, secondary schools I am speaking about.

**Mr. Nakhid:** Secondary schools?

**Mr. Chairman:** Member Nakhid put a—

**Ms. Singh:** So we are not talking about schools that have an occasional student who they receive with a low performance. We are talking about a significant population of students after the SEA were assigned a place.

**Mr. Chairman:** Member Nakhid, put a pause there. I would just like to invite, if I could, Ms. Paula Kalkman. We have not heard from you for the entire interface, and we are drawing to a close, in terms of how the primary school principals responded to this adapted curriculum. If I could be so bold Mr. Mottley and engage your colleague. Can you unmute your mike please, Ms. Kalkman.

**Ms. Kalkman:** Good day. The primary school principals and teachers, we have tried our best to adapt to the best of our ability. I must say that it is a challenge being online, but we are working along with our teachers, and we must give credit to teachers for being creative and innovative and sourcing material online to assist in the delivery of the curriculum. It is a challenge, and we still have those students that are unreachable, but we find teachers going beyond the call of duty in using WhatsApp calls, video conferencing, sending videos of themselves giving demonstrations to try to facilitate, to reach, particularly those parents and students receiving the packages. So we are adapting and trying to cope as best as we can, and we will continue to strive to reach all in the delivery of the curriculum.

**Mr. Nakhid:** I too like you do commend our teachers with enough respect for their efforts. But do we have any idea, to the Ministry of Education, the adapted curriculum, those schools that you targeted

do you have any data as to whether they effectively implemented the adapted curriculum during this COVID period, not before but during the COVID period?

**Ms. Henry-David:** Mr. Nakhid, not specifically at this time. The children would have come into school in October for the most part, those in Form 1, so it is bit short for that bit of assessment.

**Mr. Nakhid:** But things are being put in place to get that information, get that data which would be important to know where we are?

**Ms. David-Henry:** Yes, and to see whether it is effective as well.

**Mr. Chairman:** Member Nakhid, we have time for one more question before we start to round up our comments from our stakeholders. Go ahead.

**Mr. Nakhid:** Thank you, Chair. How did the remote learning methods affect the implementation of this adapted curriculum? Do you have any idea? It must have been challenging. Ministry of Education?

**Ms. Singh:** So when you think of the target in terms of students who scored under 30 per cent, the similar parameters in terms of those who are dropping out, who are not accessing or able to be reached, those who are not able to be engaged in terms of not having services or devices apply. The correlation is there. So that we know that the dice is a little bit loaded in this case. We have provided an opportunity to assist the teachers, because we recognize that these children cannot engage in the full curriculum at the point of entry into secondary school, Form 1 specifically, and that is why the effort to give them support in terms of adaptation was initiated.

**Ms. Kalkman:** If I may add—

**Mr. Chairman:** Is there something you wanted to add?

**Ms. Kalkman:** Yes, this is ongoing process, so that it would be difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of this new adaptable timetabling programme for the below 30 per cent achievers. It is an ongoing process, and we will have to keep working with them and we will see the effect in the long-term, not in the short-term.

**Mr. Chairman:** Just before I call for the heads of the organizations to provide a quick wrap-up. To the Education Ministry officials, has there been assessment of schools or districts that are underperforming under COVID restrictions with a sense to seeing what the remedial action can be in terms of resources directed to those schools, and/or educational districts?

**Ms. David-Henry:** Yes, so we as I said are in the process of collection that data. We have all along been collecting data and looking at—for instance we have looked at attendance, we have looked at whether the packages have or have not been collected. Our current round of information collecting, or rather analysis, deals a little bit more specifically in what has been happening in the classroom.

In terms of remedial efforts, once we have done the analysis we have to provide the remedies that best suit the issues, but all of our data is analyzed at a district basis. So, for example, when we look at the data we see that some of the remote districts are the ones, as we would have suspected, where we have the most challenges. So we recognize therefore that more effort has to be put into ensuring that they are resourced in those districts, so that everyone can be hopefully at the same level.

**12.45 p.m.**

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. Just before we go to the round up, I just want to precis some of the submissions received from the members of the public. This one from Aba Luke submitted January 14<sup>th</sup>. She as mother says that she has heard the cries of several persons within the community as it relates to the lack lustre teaching performance but online learning has worked very well for her child, and she knows other areas need to be strengthened but it is not all bad. And I have done quite a bit of paraphrasing there.

From Avion Mc Nish submitted on December 18<sup>th</sup>. This has failed to—with respect to remedial and special education students, students were slow in doing simple activities in school and are now slow in learning how to manipulate devices. A new strategy will have to be able to teach, and slowly introducing online skills to help students who are underperforming, and we have the technicalities in using devices, not all students are au courant with devices.

And also Sparkle Martin submitted on January 19<sup>th</sup>. To who it many concern, my name is Sparkle Martin and my daughter attends Newtown Girls. And her daughter is doing much better. The online school has worked out better for her. She normally moved at her own pace in class. She has always said, “Miss is moving too fast”, and now with Google Classrooms she could go back to the recordings and revise for herself. So it is not all bad news. I mean, different students have different aptitudes and stuff. So I just wanted to give some of the feedback from some of the submissions we have received from private citizens. Let us go through the round. Mrs. Henry-David, your closing comments, please.

**Mrs. Henry-David:** Well, Chairman, I want to thank you all for this opportunity for us to come here and speak to what the Ministry has been doing. I just want to say that we recognize as we go forward that we need to continue to collaborate with all of our stakeholders, and that is the only way that we can ensure that we meet the needs of all of students. We have to meet the needs where they are. We recognize that some of our students are at a greater disadvantage than others during these times. And we know that we have to continue to work together and to adapt to suit the needs of those children and to marshal all of our resources in order to ensure that we come out of this system in a place that we can be proud of and knowing that we have done our utmost best to treat with the needs of all of

our students. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you so much, and we know that you were the recipient on most of the focus today, so we thank you for your patience and contribution. Mrs. Antonia Tekah-De Freitas from TTUTA, please.

**Ms. Tekah-De Freitas:** Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you. TTUTA wishes to thank the Committee for the opportunity to participate today. We want to assure the Committee and the public that we are committed to ensuring the welfare of our students as we seek to promote the cause of education. We stand ready to work together with all to build resilience into our education system, and to assure that we will offer our recommendations along those lines. Thank you.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you so much. And Mrs. Sherra Carrington-James from the Association of Principals of Public Secondary Schools.

**Mrs. Carrington-James:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. And thank you very much to the entire Committee for allowing the Association of Principals to be part of this interaction and to add clarity. We hope that as we go forward our submissions would lend to us moving from this fixed mind-set into one of growth, that we would hopefully have contributed to an actionable blueprint to move forward. I am going to just take one little—having said that and thanked you graciously, I had hoped that too that we would have gotten to the gaps. We have not. So I hope in the submission you would pay attention to the gaps because we in the Principals should feel that though the policies are there, just moving it online has not worked efficiently all around.

I am going to give you one little example. How does a teacher apply for leave? Does a teacher take leave, if he or she is at home in his or her house?—and that is going on. That is something to work out maybe with our union, and how that policy, of application for leave is actually—so I say thank you very much. Thank you for the support, the interest and we look forward to further involvement of our association.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you so much. And as you raised that point, there is nothing that—we welcome your further submissions in writing based on our discussions today that we can factor into our final report. So thank you for that. And Mr. Mottley from the National Primary Principals Association.

**Mr. Mottley:** Mr. Chairman, NAPSPA wishes to thank you for the opportunity to be able to have a voice here today. On leaving we would want to say that while pandemic would have widened the gaps between the haves and have nots, we want to urge the powers that be to take the necessary steps to ensure that they accelerate the efforts to ensure that the gaps are not so wide, that it will take a number of years or a long time for them to be narrowed again, otherwise we are going to end up with some



serious situations in our country. So I want to call on the Government to please resource, please resource the Ministry of Education with all that it needs so that it can be able to ensure that all of our nation's children have equal access to education.

**Mr. Chairman:** Equitable access.

**Mr. Mottley:** Equitable access.

**Mr. Chairman:** All right. Thank you all so much for your participation today in your prior submissions. Once again you can feel free based on our discussions today to submit further submissions to the Secretariat. We will welcome and factor them into our final report. We would also like to thank members of the Committee, member Forde and member Monroe, member Indarsingh, member Singh and member Nakhid and members Beckles and Sinanan in their absentia. They had a conflicting engagement with Cabinet I understand, members of the Secretariat, led by the erstwhile Mr. Julien Ogilvie, who always provide amazing support to the Committee, and of course the persons who submitted privately and to the Secretariat and viewers and listeners to this broadcast. I am Paul Richards, the Chairman. We thank you for viewing and listening and we wish you a safe and enjoyable evening. Thank you so much. We are now adjourned.

**12.51 p.m.:** *Meeting adjourned.*

**VERBATIM NOTES OF THE FOURTH VIRTUAL MEETING OF THE SOCIAL SERVICES & PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION COMMITTEE HELD IN PUBLIC ON WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 17, 2021, AT 10.22 A.M.**

**PRESENT**

Mr. Paul Richards	Chairman
Mr. Roger Munroe	Member
Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh	Member
Mr. Avinash Singh	Member
Mr. David Nakhid	Member
Mrs. Penelope Beckles-Robinson	Member
Mr. Julien Ogilvie	Secretary
Mr. Johnson Greenidge	Assistant Secretary
Ms. Aaneesa Baksh	Graduate Research Assistant
Ms. Nicole Brown	Parliamentary Intern

**ABSENT**

Mr. Esmond Forde	Vice-Chairman
Mr. Rohan Sinanan	Member [ <i>Excused</i> ]
Ms. Allyson West	Member

**SANATAN DHARMA MAHA SABHA BOARD OF EDUCATION**

Mr. Jeewan Ramdhanie	Assistant Secretary
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**ARYA PRATINIDHI SABHA OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO**

Mr. Ravi Rambarran	Secretary
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**PRESBYTERIAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS' BOARD OF EDUCATION**

Ms. Geeta K. Maharaj	General Secretary
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**BAPTIST BOARD OF MANAGEMENT**

Mr. Michael Hills-Wilson	Secretary
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**ST. JOSEPH CLUNY BOARD OF EDUCATION**

Ms. Debra East	Principal (Secretary) Ag.
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**ASJA BOARD OF EDUCATION**

Mr. Rahimool Hosein	General Secretary
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**ANGLICAN BOARD OF EDUCATION**

Mrs. Avion Alexander-Titus	Member Anglican Teachers Association
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## **PRESBYTERIAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS' BOARD OF EDUCATION**

Mr. Joel Bajnath

General Secretary

**Mr. Chairman:** Good morning everyone and welcome to the viewing and listening audience to this the second virtual hearing of the Joint Select Committee on Social Services and Public Administration. This is the Committee's second hearing with stakeholders, pursuant to our enquiry into the effects of the hybrid learning system on student performance in government and government-assisted schools during the revised COVID-19 restrictions.

We would like to remind participants that this is a virtual meeting and there are specific guidelines that would apply including, one, ensuring that your microphone is muted when you are not speaking to help keep the background noise to a minimum, but also conversely, to ensure that you engage your microphone when you are seeking to make a contribution. We also ask that you adjust your camera so that your face is clearly visible. I know that the background tech team would have done some checks before, but sometimes people inadvertently move out of range of their cameras, so try and keep your face clearly visible in the camera at all times. Of course, ensure that the notifications on your cellphone, if you are using a cellphone or any other electronic device in your vicinity, are muted during the course of this meeting.

At this time, we would like to invite members of the Committee, of which I am the Chairman, Paul Richards, we would like members of our Committee who are present, others will join us in process, to please indicate their presence and introduce themselves. We could start with member Nakhid. [Silence] Member Nakhid, your mike is still muted.

[Introductions made]

**Mr. Chairman:** We are also expecting the Vice-Chair, member Forde, to join us in process, and also member Munroe and member Sinanan who are otherwise engaged, but will join us in process. Thank you all members, for joining us. Of course, I am the Committee's Chairman, Paul Richards, and I am happy to be with you to be able to engage our stakeholders once again this morning in this Joint Select Committee on Social Services and Public Administration.

We have several entities before us this morning, including the Anglican Education Board of Management, the ASJA Board of Education, the Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha Board of Education, the Presbyterian Secondary Schools' Board of Education, the Presbyterian Primary Schools' Board of Education, the Cluny Central Board of Education, the Baptist Board of Management and the Arya Pratinidhi Sabha School Board—I hope I did not mispronounce that.

So we would like the members of those entities—I think one member is present representing each

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entity—to please introduce themselves starting with the Anglican Education Board of Management. [Interruption] They are not here as yet? Let us go to the ASJA Board of Education, please.

**Mr. Hosein:** All the other representatives, rest of educational boards, I am Rahimool Hosein, General Secretary of the Anjuman Sunnat-ul-Jamaat Association. I am also a member of the ASJA Education Board. Currently we have jurisdiction over 13 schools, government-assisted schools, seven primary and six secondary schools. I am happy to be here to share our views and listen and see how we can improve or how we can better pave the way forward for this hybrid education to go forward. Thank you.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you so much. Let us go to Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha Board of Education.

**Mr. Ramdhanie:** Good morning. I am happy to be present here at this meeting this morning. Thank you.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you so much. Presbyterian Secondary Schools' Board of Education.

**Mr. Bajnath:** Good morning. First of all, I would like to apologize. Apparently the device I am using is experiencing some technical difficulties, so you would not be able to see my face, but I am working on it.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. We are glad that you are here with us. We have your audio quite clearly. Next, the Presbyterian Primary Schools' Board of Education.

**Ms. Maharaj:** Morning. Thanks for the invitation to be part of this discussion today, and I am sure we will have a pretty good discussion. Thank you again.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you so much for being with us. The Baptist Board of Management.

**Mr. Hills-Wilson:** Good morning, Sir. Very happy to be here and hoping for a very fruitful meeting.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you so much. The Arya Pratinidhi Sabha School Board. You could help me with the pronunciation of that please, if I did not pronounce it properly.

**Mr. Rambarran:** The Arya Pratinidhi Sabha. Firstly, I would like to say to the Chairman and to the members of the Joint Select Committee and my fraternal colleagues in education, thank you for the invitation and the opportunity to provide the feedback. We are a 108-year-old organization. We run nine primary schools and one early childhood school. Our schools are deliberately set up in the rural areas. So I am looking forward to hearing [Inaudible] with you this morning. Thank you.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you so much. Thank you all so much for being with us. We will be joined by the Anglican Education Board of Management—I am sorry, let us go to Cluny Central Board of Education. My apologies.

**Ms. East:** I am representing the Cluny Central Board of Management this morning. These are the

schools that were founded by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Cluny. We are very happy to be here this morning to contribute, to listen, to learn and to work with all stakeholders towards improving education for all our children.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you so much. Once again we will be joined in process by the Anglican Education Board of Management.

Just to go through the enquiry's objectives. There are four main objectives including:

1. To assess the effectiveness of the hybrid learning system used by government and government-assisted schools in curriculum delivery;
2. To compare and contrast student performance using traditional versus hybrid learning systems for similar time periods;
3. To examine the systems and methods used to monitor and evaluate student performance in the hybrid learning environment; and
4. To assess the readiness of the hybrid learning environments and system to adequately prepare students for external examinations.

At this time, we advise you, both Committee members and officials, representatives, to direct your questions, concerns or comments through myself, the Chair. We would also like to remind you, because very often we forget, to activate your microphones on your devices when you are seeking to make a contribution, and to kindly turn it off when you have concluded making your contribution.

So at this time—I think the Anglican Board has just joined us. So good morning to the Anglican Education Board of Management. Could you identify yourself please? *[Interruption]* They are in the process of joining. So good morning again to the Anglican Education Board of Management, if you could identify yourself and your organization please. *[Interruption]*

**Ms. Alexander-Titus:** Good morning. I do apologize for being late. I was informed by my board that this meeting was put off. They said they received a call from the office. So I do apologize for being late.

**Mr. Chairman:** Well, you are here with us now. So thank you for being with us. Could you identify yourself for the listening and viewing public please? *[Silence]* I think we are having a little difficulty; we will get back to that.

Yes, I was saying before, we have four main objectives. Just to give some context, which I did on our last occasion when we met with the Government schools, primary and secondary schools, and the education Ministry officials, that the Education Ministry had kindly submitted quite a bit of data on the 15<sup>th</sup> of December, 2020, which now may have been stale-dated quite a bit, but will still be certainly

relevant to our discussions today. It is focused on the enquiry into the effects of the hybrid learning system on student performance in government and government-assisted schools during the revised COVID-19 restrictions.

As you would know, as education stakeholders, those restrictions had been further revised by the Government with the allowing for Standard 5 students and Forms 4 and 5 students. I think Form 6 students are in preparation of their practicums and their examinations coming up, and also the SEA, which I think is carded for June 10<sup>th</sup> coming up later this year. So there have been further revisions and relaxations to some of those earlier restrictions.

The Ministry has provided information for context, and I will just go through a little bit of the information for you because you may not have been privy to the information divulged at the last sitting. One of the questions was what has been the feedback obtained regarding teaching and online learning systems categorized in relation to perspectives of teachers, students and parents. One, to what extent are students grasping lessons and the stimulating content.

The report indicated most teachers reported they have reliable Internet connection. That is 81.5 per cent secondary, and 71.9 per cent primary. That was at that time, so it may have changed. So you advise us of your own experiences. They were satisfied with the software they were using, 68.2 per cent primary, and 73.2 per cent secondary.

Substantially less teachers agreed that students had reliable Internet. 34.1 per cent primary and 35.3 per cent secondary agreed that students had reliable Internet, which is essential for a hybrid system. Access to devices, which has been a major concern over the last nine or so months, and 33.4 per cent primary, 35.3 per cent secondary. Also importantly, in terms of learning environment, a peaceful environment for learning, 29.9 per cent primary, and 29.2 per cent secondary.

There had been questions also asked about the extent to which teachers thought students were grasping the lessons, and assimilating the content. Teachers were asked to rate this effectiveness of remote learning and compared to traditional learning on a scale of one to five, one being not effective, and five being very effective in a Likert scale. On average, primary schoolteachers gave a rating of 2.9 out of five, while secondary school students gave a rating of 3.14 out of five.

We also had information based on the number of students who actually were logging on, and students who had not logged on; how many students at each level of schooling are currently unable to access at the various online the new platforms. Keep in mind also for accuracy, this is a report that was delivered to us on the 15<sup>th</sup> of December so the data may have changed significantly or not, so we have to keep that in mind: in primary schools, 39,861 or 35.1 per cent, and in secondary schools, 6,909, or

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8.4 per cent.

At the ECCE level, 2,195 students were at that time unable to access various online portals, so we want to get your experiences where those data points are concerned.

The Ministry of Education also indicated that platforms are a combination of learn.moe.gov.tt, where there are course work, resources and worksheets and live classes. They indicated 158,766 students registered since the 16<sup>th</sup> of the third month, that is March 2020; 6,393 students online, which was registered as at 26.8 per cent decrease. The average daily login for the week referencing 913 students. 51.9 per cent of students accessed via desktop, while 39.9 per cent via mobile devices, and 8.2 per cent via a tablet device. I am actually going to underline, almost 40 per cent, well, basically, 40 per cent at that time were accessing via mobile devices, and how effective you find that is in terms of students' ability to use a mobile device. I know I would find it a challenge. And, 953 courses were available from 49, under development for publishing.

In terms of those who would have accessed, 81,589 students and teachers accessed the portals as of the 16<sup>th</sup> of March, and 8,029 teachers and students were online. There were 18,362 sessions, which translates into 2.42 sessions per user at that time again, and 49.6 per cent of users accessed via mobile; 42.4 per cent via desktop and 8 per cent via a tablet device. Again, what jumps out at me here is 49.6 per cent of users via a mobile device.

So that is some of the data related to the system, the education system as submitted by the Education Ministry, as of the 15<sup>th</sup> of December, 2020, that is last year.

So we move now to what we would like to find out—your experiences would have been. I would ask for some quick opening comments again, and concise comments, so we could start a discussion based on your deliverables.

Let us start with the Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha Board of Education and Mr. Ramdhanie as the Assistant Secretary, and what your experience has been.

**Mr. Ramdhanie:** Good morning. The experience is different. Various schools, depending on the location of the school, the situation changes. It changes with respect to the connectivity. It changes with respect to access to devices. What we have found is that over the period of time, the time that you quoted earlier on to now, it has improved where through the assistance of the Ministry of Education, through the assistance of the board, and even through the assistance of parents, many more students are accessing connectivity and devices.

**Mr. Chairman:** Okay, thank you. From the Arya Pratinidhi Sabha of Trinidad and Tobago, what is your experience please? Mr. Rambarran?

**Mr. Rambarran:** My apologies. Similar to the Maha Sabha, our experience is mixed depending on the location of the school. So for example, if you take our flagship school Gandhi Memorial and Aranguez, everyone has a device, everyone is connected because of the high level of socio economics there. They have that. Then you take our other schools, Barrackpore/Rio Claro, half of these schools do not have devices, but generally throughout the schools, what we find is although there is Internet access, the Internet access is not reliable. Many of—frequently during the day, children are dropping out and many of them sometimes just cannot reconnect. But if I had to give an overriding theme on the four areas of enquiry effectiveness, student performance, systems and methods, and readiness, and to arrive at a conclusion, our view would be that the quicker these children return physically in schools, the better it would be. I am saying that from a primary school viewpoint, from our own experience where you are dealing with children, 11-year-olds and under. And the statistics on mobile devices, that is broadly our experience too. It is just—this is unsustainable.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. Well, the sustainability of it is a serious factor but at the end of the day, as we would all understand, the return of students to schools on a full-time basis, it is solely dependent on the assessment of the health officials. The preservation of life is paramount in this, although learning is also very important in education. So we are guided by the health officials and the Government in that regard. Thank you, Mr. Rambarran.

Let us go to the Presbyterian Primary Schools' Board of Education, Ms. Maharaj please.

**Ms. Maharaj:** Yes, Mr. Chairman. A lot of what has been said previously by Mr. Ramdhanie and Mr. Rambarran, does hold. However, things have changed, and we have to say, based on our feedback from our principals and our schools, our primary schools, we can say that we have about 87 per cent of our students online, and 13 per cent not online, and mainly because of a lack of devices and a lack of connectivity. So that is basically our position right now.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. I am going to ask all the stakeholders in turn again going down. In terms of the students, Ms. Maharaj has indicated 13 per cent of students not online, what are the experiences regarding delivered packages? Because some of the stakeholders would have indicated that for those students who do not have connectivity and/or devices, or unreliable connectivity, there may have been provision in some cases, if not all, to deliver the curriculum and the school resources directly to students in printed packages, and what your experiences would have been where those are concerned. Since you are there, Ms. Maharaj, you could give us your experience.

**Ms. Maharaj:** Sure. Now, a lot of our teachers and our principals regularly every week have specific days when they would come in, have their discussions and so on with the different departments. They



do it sometimes in person or with all the protocols of course observed. But the packages are prepared. There is a specific time, specific day, dates for collection, but the problem is that it is not always collected on time, and it is not always brought back on time. So that is the main setback. Of course, there are schools that are having problems with photocopiers and lack of toner and stuff like that, and funding did not come in time, and that kind of thing. Of course you have the use of this equipment more regularly and in a more, shall we say, a more concentrated way than it was before. So upkeep of this equipment and stuff like that, that costs a lot of money.

But where packages are concerned, the principals and teachers are doing the best that they can. They put it out there. There are some that, like I said, are not collected sometimes for more than a week. So you find that when that happens it is difficult for the students who are collecting these packages not on time, and not returning it on time to be corrected, you find that there is a disparity in, shall we say, keeping up with those who are online.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you so much.

**Ms. Maharaj:** But that again would depend on whether it is collected, what arrangements the parents make. But they are there at the school, at the appropriate and appointed time, and parents are given proper—shall we say, they will know when to come, and stuff like that. So that is being done.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you so much. Let us go now to Mr. Michael Hills-Wilson of the Baptist Board of Management.

**Mr. Hills-Wilson:** Yes, Sir. Our schools, our students, about 75 per cent have been doing very well. We must thank our teachers for their positive action, both online and extra classes that they have sometimes. Our students are grasping the help that is given from the Ministry of Education, we are happy for that, and ensuring that work is done.

Our problem as well, like some of the others, our students from some of the areas, the packages are collected in some cases and not returned on time. So that that is a bit of a problem. The suggestion is that the social worker might visit the homes to find out what is happening, because some of our parents are not at home at certain times, and therefore that may cause part of the students not to send back in their reports. But in general they are getting by, and work is continuing apace. However, there is nothing like face-to-face teaching. Thank you.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you so much, Mr. Hills-Wilson. Let us go to the St. Joseph Cluny Board of Education, Ms. East, the Principal and Acting Secretary.

**Ms. East:** Good morning again. In terms of the Internet access and devices, most of our schools, most of our students have access to the Internet as well as devices. Initially, when we started there

were some students who did not have access, and we did explore that option of packages. That did not work very well, because we had the same issues that were raised before, where some students, the packages were collected and some students opted—they may return one for one subject, but not for the other.

We did get assistance from the Board as well as from our stakeholders, alumni and so on. So at this time, most of our students have devices, and those who do not own those devices, they have devices that are loaned. We do have a few students who are using phones as well, and that is a concern that you would have expressed, Mr. Chairman, but they seem to be able to navigate those phones to be able to access classes and so on.

One of the issues that we have in terms of devices and access, is that that changes daily. It is very dynamic. So you would do a survey and you would check, and all of your students would have devices this week, and if you check the same students next week, you would find that something went wrong with the technology and so on. So it is an ongoing situation, and at any one day or any other time that you check, the figures may be different. But for now, the Cluny schools, we can say that our students have devices and access.

**10.50 a.m.**

**Madam Chairman:** Thank you so much, Ms. East. Let us go now to the ASJA Board of Education, Mr. Hosein.

**Mr. Hosein:** Thank you, Chairman. We share a similar concern as the other denominational boards, the access to devices. Even though it is in a minority, it is of great concern to us. The teachers—we would think, we want to think and from our chatting with the teachers, interaction with the school system, this system that the Ministry is asking us to assess, the hybrid learning system, our review of the literature, we do not think it is a true, true, hybrid learning system in place currently in our schools. I remember—a true hybrid system really involves where some students attend classes physically, and at the same time the same instructional practices that the teacher passes on to the physical students present is the same instructions given to the online students. So we do not think it is a true, true hybrid system of teaching/learning that exists currently, and probably that is something we need to look at. I remember distinctly when I attended one of these sessions last year, we were, I think, it was mid-year, if I am not mistaken, I suggested that we—if we equip our schools, our schools with infrastructure, meaning the Internet connectivity and all the teachers attend the school and do their online teaching from the school, the reply from your high office, Mr. Chairman, was that it was a noble idea but eventually it has taken, it is taking place right now. What we are seeing is purely the online classes,

purely. The teacher has to visit the school, as Ms. Geeta said, to deliver and pick up assignments, to deliver assignments at the school, sometimes it is not forthcoming.

So what we are saying, and we are seeing that there seems to have been a little more preparation on the part of the teachers preparing them for this hybrid learning. If we want to really see, we are engaged in a true hybrid learning system.

In the programme, in one of the documents that was sent to me on the Appendix II, it did mention a blended/hybrid learning system, a combination of both physical teaching and that the same instruction reaches the child who is unable to attend the school.

So what we can gather from that is it, how can we—that problem of a lack of devices for students. If we have them, if we put systems—I have heard you when you said that, it all depends on the Ministry of Health guiding or whatnot but if we look at the students who are unable, lack of connectivity, lack of devices and we have them come to the school, we have the teacher present in the school, the teacher delivers the instruction from the school both to the physically present student and those online. And I am repeating myself but that would entail now a lack of infrastructure being put, physical infrastructure being put into the school, for example, you will need enclosed classrooms. How many of our schools, primary schools especially, have the enclosed classroom? That is something we need to look at. But at this time I would like to say that, while we commend the Ministry of Education for getting some kind of teaching, learning assessment in the system, we need to do a little with more, we need to have more physical infrastructure in place. Thank you.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you so much. And I agree with you in principle but this situation involves that no one can predict, and I think that the ongoing or the evolution of this will certainly include some of your suggestions where some students would have to come into the physical space. But, again, I mean this is about guidance from the health officials and what they see the data is presenting in the public domain where, I guess, some students will—right now we are Standard 5 and Form 5, Forms 4 and 5 and Form 6 to see how that goes and I guess that started last week Monday on the 8<sup>th</sup>. So the Ministry officials I am sure will get a sense of, are the risks involved where that is concerned and what the data is presenting, and then they will probably make a decision after that to see what could happen but thank you for your contribution. Let us go now to Mr. Joel Bajnath of the Presbyterian Secondary Schools Board of Education.

**Mr. Bajnath:** Okay. Good morning again. I have finally switched devices so you should be getting a video.

**Madam Chairman:** Thank you.

**Mr. Bajnath:** The concerns really are few. The secondary school boards fortunately due to the adcom committees in our relevant schools, we were able to secure devices for the children. Some of the problems that may occur or still occur is that connectivity issues, you know, the Internet issues at home, some because of locations and things like that, the communication process is hampered and so delivery of the actual work, it tends to be difficult.

Apart from that the schools have, each student has devices, laptops. The adcom committees, the relevant PTAs in the different schools already had things in place. And the secondary schools were gearing for online exams for some time now, so due to this pandemic a lot of the infrastructure was already in place to create this e-education or this hybrid programme. So far it is working well with about an average of 95 or so students attending classes. We did have one of the schools, maybe one or two students who stopped and communication is there with relevant deans and the parents to enquire in case students do not show up to classes. Why? And seek to have them, inform the teachers or the relevant deans when students would not be able to attend classes virtually. But more or less everything is under control in the relevant schools.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. And let us go to Mrs. Avion Alexander-Titus from the Anglican Board of Education and what your experience has been.

**Mrs. Alexander-Titus:** Good morning, again.

**Mr. Chairman:** Good morning.

**Mrs. Alexander-Titus:** In our Anglican schools we would have experienced an increase in the number of children accessing synchronous learning but unfortunately that is via phone. And then what would happen is, as one of the other members, attendees would have indicated was that, one week they have access and the another week the device is damaged and there is no access. There are also days when access, Internet access is a challenge. So I remember in particular I would have had a day where no teaching took place at a particular level because it was challenging for the whole day. So that is something that we would experience from time to time.

One of our concerns though would be student support services. We would hear that, yes, they are there to support. The problem is you have a disparity among the districts. So in one district you would be aware that if children are missing for one, two days they are able to call the social worker, and that social worker attends immediately to that situation. In other district they, it seems as though it is business as normal. So you have to submit a referral. Weeks pass, months pass, then it is assigned to a social worker, you are aware that it is assigned, you see no intervention taking place, nothing happening. So there is a concern with that support that should be offered from the Student Support

Services. I think or we think that as much as we are called as educators to be flexible and change our way of responding to what is before us now, we want to see that happen with the Student Support Services as well.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you so much.

**Mrs. Alexander-Titus:** Can I or—

**Mr. Chairman:** Go ahead please.

**Mrs. Alexander-Titus:** Okay, thank you. Packages, what we are realizing is that the packages work well maybe for reinforcements but the packages are not working well for instruction especially with the little ones, those early childhood students. So in particular those families that we would describe as low SES, low socioeconomic, you would find that those parents have difficulty supporting the child and certainly a package cannot give the child the support or give the child the understanding they may need to complete activities, so for us we do not believe it to be effective at all. Slowly but surely we are getting support from sponsors for devices but it is slow. Some schools would have engaged parents in a loans programme but it is still not enough, and we still do have a presence in many of our schools, a group of children that we deem beyond reachable. And if one child is unreached that is one too many.

So we really need for all children to be able to access devices and the Internet but additionally we have discovered that for some homes, even though we give them Internet, we provide devices, some cases electricity, those children still may not access because the parents are working or just because of their value for education, things have not been put in place to support that child at home. So something else has to happen for those children because we have a lot of parents that were not successful at school, and I suspect that this may be intimidating, this whole process may be intimidating for them. And additionally with the access and the online and synchronous learning, what we have found is sometimes based on the children, it may take a whole term for them to acclimatize. So, yes, there is a concern about how much is really being assimilated by the child. From last term to this term we would have had to reteach certain subject areas. Yes? And clearly then a lot more support, professional development support is needed for the teachers as well so that they can really navigate. But in every term there is that sort of question looming over our heads, are they really learning, is it really effective, in particular for the low SES students of Trinidad and Tobago? We have some low SES schools that all the children have devices because they were sponsored and, of course, in other schools it is uneven. So I think that is my contribution. Thank you.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you so much. I am going to open the floor to the other members of the

Committee now, and I will start by posing a question based on several of the responses. We keep talking about these missing students and almost in an abstract way. We already have an issue in Trinidad and Tobago where between primary school and secondary school transition based on information coming from the Education Ministry in the past couple years that I have been able to obtain, there is a between and it varies from year to year, 1,200 to 1,500 sometimes 1,700 students drop off before the pandemic between primary and secondary schools. And we are talking about these students now who are adversely affected by the pandemic conditions because of added their socioeconomic conditions, their lack of connectivity and no devices.

And the question is, are you getting more or the type of support you need from Students Support Services to identify, if you refer these students to the Ministry of Education and to remediate or devise some sort of mechanism to reach these students because it is all well and good for us to identify them and say well, there is X percentage or Y percentage or X number of students who are unreachable, they do not have devices or not returning the packages. But this—these gaps are having a significant instant impact on their education and by extension their futures, and we are going to start to see the effect of this if it is not remedied in two to three years moving forward.

So my question to you, while I open the floor to the other members of the Committee is, what are the solutions that you see because you are on the ground, you are the stakeholders, and are you getting the kind of extra support from Student Support Services through social workers or other mechanisms to intervene in these cases? Who wants to go first?

**Mr. Rambarran:** Chairman?

**Mr. Chairman:** Yes, go ahead please.

**Mr. Rambarran:** Okay. I think generally, certainly our experience is, there is a minority where they do not have access. So let us for the time being ignore the mode of access whether it be phones or tablets. So we have a minority certainly in our schools of the order of 15 per cent say where accessibility or devices is an issue but it is connected. It is connected to the socioeconomic status. It is also connected to before the advent of the pandemic, those students themselves were struggling. The pandemic has simply exacerbated their struggle. And so, yes, the Ministry has done a commendable job in these packages and the teachers themselves where they can. But when you are in a home where, you know, for various reasons the parents either they have work or ad hoc work, they simply cannot supervise children.

**Mr. Chairman:** We are on the same page. And we say 15 per cent as a number—

**Mr. Rambarran:** No. No. I am dealing with the Vedic school experience. I am not dealing with the

aggregation of—because we are not privy to the statistics that you read out, by the way, from the Ministry of Education. We would love to have them. So to me, given that our teachers and our principals, to be fair, they are coping, I would think, pretty well in a different environment. It is really one of resources. There has to be a targeted, and I use that word deliberately, a targeted intervention for this minority. It has to be. So we cannot expect our teachers and our principals who are already having to cope with this new system to deal with, what I would call, fundamentally a socioeconomic, they are all connected by their socioeconomic status. Okay? And so there has to be a targeted intervention, and the boards themselves do not have the resources to effect such a targeted intervention. And so at the same time, our experience of the social services, et cetera, is one of resources, there is a fundamental challenge because—so I do not have this full solution but what I do know, there has to be a specific initiative targeted at these children who simply have no devices who would have, as I said, prior to that have issues, so there has to be a targeted socioeconomic intervention. That is the only way to—because I agree with you, the statistics will show over the years, you know, these children, it is not a high threshold to enter from primary school to secondary school. So if you are not even meeting what I call a low threshold that exacerbates the problem. So I think the one takeaway is for that minority, targeted intervention. You cannot expect the normal, the normal teaching system.

**Mr. Chairman:** It would not solve itself. Thank you. Members of the Committee, the floor is open. Does anyone want to question or comment?

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Chairman, if I could—pleasant good morning, again, to all. I have heard, and whilst we have not heard the specific numbers in what we have been hearing percentages from the different representatives and so on in terms of devices and in certain instances we would have heard about students using phones to access the online teaching and so on. Have the respective schools under their respective jurisdictions engaged the Ministry of Education for the necessary support for devices from the Ministry under the, what we would call, Adopt-a-School Programme and what has the Ministry done in terms of the provision of devices under the Adopt-a-School Programme? I would like to get feedback from the respective representatives.

**Ms. Maharaj:** Mr. Indarsingh.

**Mr. Chairman:** Yes, go ahead please, Ms. Maharaj.

**Ms. Maharaj:** All right.

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Yes.

**Ms. Maharaj:** Now I know the Presbyterian Primary School Board under that initiative has attracted

that help, that Adopt-a-School Programme with at least two or three of our schools. It is not a large number but there are some. Where that has happened, we are happy to say that there has been quite a lot of help there.

Also the Ministry had another initiative where they asked the Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago to furnish and donate devices. So far in the Presbyterian primary schools about a third of our schools have been able to receive over 500 devices. They are mainly tablets and media, I forget the name, media pads and tablets. So our schools—no, we have a third of our schools have received—not 500, 300, just over 300 devices. And I think right now some of our schools are still receiving, so that number will increase. So that has been the experience of those two initiatives from the Presbyterian Primary School Board where the Ministry of Education is concerned with the Adopt-a-School Programme and the TATT, what we call the Telecommunications Authority Trinidad and Tobago, the TATT devices. Thank you.

**Mr. Indarsingh:** If I could ask in terms of numbers you have applied for, how many have you been provided with? Or in terms of a number that is outstanding at the moment.

**Ms. Maharaj:** Initially we had—we have from all the schools that we have gotten about close to 7,000 students without devices. Right? And we had about a third of that number with connectivity issues. Okay? There is no—

**Mr. Chairman:** Seven thousand, you said?

**Ms. Maharaj:** Ah?

**Mr. Chairman:** How many students?

**Ms. Maharaj:** We have—when we asked our principals and teachers to furnish us with information of the number of devices required but that was since last year. We got 6,998, so I am saying 7,000. Okay?

**Mr. Chairman:** And this is the Presbyterian primary schools alone?

**Ms. Maharaj:** Yeah. Well remember we are looking at—what has happened though, you have to understand as well that whatever devices that were given, it has been distributed through the schools but because of the pending SEA, the Standard 5 students have been given preference. Okay? Now, in almost all of our schools, the Standard 5 students have been fortunate to get devices. In the cases where there are not, those are few and far between. What will stop that would be the connectivity issues. Right? So you might have—some people do not have electricity, and then again, some people do not have connectivity because they cannot afford it and that kind of thing.

Some of these devices that have been given also come with a three month, I think, data plan, if you



want to call it that or something that they will have connectivity so they do not have to depend on something. So our numbers are large, there are those who have, like I say, about third of that number with the connectivity issues. But like I am saying, we had the Standard 5 students—we have about what? Standard 5 students will be about 2,500—in the vicinity of 2,500. Right? So we have tried to make sure that they all get devices, those Standard 5 students and they came from various places, not only the Adopt-a-School Programme, and not only the Ministry. But I believe that the initiative with that, and the initiative with the Ministry of Education they have both borne fruits. So if you are looking for numbers, Mr. Indarsingh, all I can tell you is that, at a point we looked at 7,000 devices needed. I will not go so far as to say that we, our students have received anywhere close that, if you understand what I am saying. But I am saying that there have been efforts made to make that as close as possible but that is the reality.

**Mr. Chairman:** Can we get a sense from Ms. East and also Mr. Hills-Wilson about their situation regarding member Indarsingh's question about devices, please?

**Ms. East:** Debra East, Cluny schools. Our devices came mainly from private sector and from alumni or various stakeholders. One of our schools received four devices from the Adopt-a-School Programme. But as I said, all of the other devices that we received, they did not come from the Ministry, they came from the private sector.

**Mr. Chairman:** Do you have a gap still where that is concerned? Or are you relatively comfortable where you are with devices?

**Ms. East:** Yes, we are relatively comfortable. We still have a few students every week, as I said, the number changes but we do have.

**Mr. Chairman:** Good to hear.

**Ms. East:** Yes.

**Mr. Chairman:** And, Mr. Hills-Wilson.

**Mr. Hills-Wilson:** Yes, Sir. Most of our children they have devices now, about 75 per cent of them. I am still using the per cent. Some were donated by good citizens, some came from the Government, and we are still seeking to get a few devices for some children.

**Mr. Chairman:** What would you say is your percentage shortfall at present?

**Mr. Hills-Wilson:** About 25 per cent.

**Mr. Chairman:** One quarter of your students do not have devices.

**Mr. Hills-Wilson:** Yes.

**Mr. Chairman:** Okay. And, Mr. Bajnath.

**Mr. Hills-Wilson:** Those are the ones with connectivity problems, most of them.

**Mr. Chairman:** Mr. Bajnath, what is your situation? Mr. Bajnath from the Presbyterian Secondary Schools? Okay. While he is getting sorted, let us go to Mrs. Alexander-Titus, and what is your situation with the Anglican Board of Education in terms of devices and connectivity? What are your—

**Mrs. Alexander-Titus:** Good morning. Go ahead.

**Mr. Chairman:** What do you think your gap is? Your shortfall is?

**Mrs. Alexander-Titus:** My gap is about 25 to 30 per cent as well.

**Mr. Chairman:** So almost about a quarter of students—

**Mrs. Alexander-Titus:** Yes.

**Mr. Chairman:**—still—

**Mrs. Alexander-Titus:** Yes. Yes.

**Mr. Chairman:** And this is up to date right now?

**Mrs. Alexander-Titus:** Yes.

**Mr. Chairman:** Okay. And did we cover the ASJA Board, Mr. Hosein, and what your gap is? Okay. Let us go to Mr. Rambarran.

**Mr. Hosein:** Yes, Mr. Chairman.

**Mr. Rambarran:** All right, Mr. Hosein, I yield to you. Go ahead.

**Mr. Hosein:** Okay. Thank you so much, Sir. With respect to the ASJA schools, we have a small percentage, less than 10 per cent who are without devices, without devices. On the question—directly answering MP Indarsingh, Committee member Indarsingh's question, we have a total primary school population in ASJA about 2,100 students. So we are looking—let us say 10 per cent, that is about 210 students. And I remember an old Sufi story. The shepherd is not concerned about the flock, the number of sheep that they are together but the one or two that has gone astray, and we need to pay attention to those students.

As far as the Government concerned, the Government would have, the Ministry of Education would have this first-hand information as to who and the number in each school how many are without devices. And what the Government should—I do not think that any one of us, I certainly will—our board does not know what criteria is used by the Ministry of Education to distribute laptops or devices. Most of our devices have been from the private sector and individuals. Thank you.

**Mr. Chairman:** That is why you are here. We are trying to get information directly from you.

**Mr. Hosein:** Yes.

**Mr. Chairman:** All right. Mrs. Alexander-Titus.

**Mrs. Alexander-Titus:** Yes.

**Mr. Chairman:** Did you give us a sense of your gap—

**Mrs. Alexander-Titus:** Pardon me?

**Mr. Chairman:**—for the Anglican Board of Education?

**Ms. East:** The gap indicated 25 to 30 per cent.

**Mr. Chairman:** Twenty-five per cent. Okay. Thank you. Did we leave out anyone? Mr. Rambarran.

**11.20 a.m.**

**Mr. Rambarran:** Chairman, of about, you know, 2,400-odd students. I would say right now we are about 200 students without devices.

**Mr. Chairman:** Say about 10 per cent also.

**Mr. Rambarran:** Right. But most of our devices we have engaged through sponsorship and fundraising by the organization itself. That is where we have gotten most of our devices.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. And did we get a sense from Mr. Ramdhanie, from the Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha, of what your gap may be?

**Mr. Ramdhanie:** It is about 30 per cent, but the Adopt-a-School Programme, the Maha Sabha received no device from the Ministry. The Maha Sabha provided over 1,000 devices through their own initiative, over 50 from private citizens, and right now we have about 500 devices provided by the TATT Programme, which is assisting us in getting rid of some of the students without devices. Thank you.

**Mr. Chairman:** Well, I will consider TATT as state. Members of the Committee, you have any questions at this time? The floor is open again. Did you finish, member Indarsingh?

**Mr. Indarsingh:** I would like to ask a follow-up question in terms of the—we have heard the percentages or the numbers, in terms of the vulnerable students, are the schools under their charges, their respective jurisdictions, have they been communicated with, from the Ministry of Education in terms the means test and what will be the criteria through this means test for vulnerable students to access devices through the Ministry of Education Adopt-a-School Programme? And in addition to that, has the Ministry started to roll out these means tests in the respective schools so the process could get going?

**Mr. Chairman:** Let us start with Mr. Ramdhanie on that, the response please.

**Mr. Ramdhanie:** The Maha Sabhas that received any information with respect to the means test at this point in time.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. Mr. Rambarran.

**Mr. Rambarran:** Same here, Chairman.

**Mr. Chairman:** Mr. Rambarran, in response to member Indarsingh's question about the means test?

**Mr. Rambarran:** Yeah. We do not have that information.

**Mr. Chairman:** Okay. Ms. Maharaj.

**Ms. Maharaj:** We do not have that information, Sir.

**Mr. Chairman:** Let me ask the question about this, does anyone have information regarding the means test and how it is to be applied, as a conversation with the Ministry of Education?

**Ms. Maharaj:** No.

**Mr. Chairman:** Well, I take it that no one has that information. Member Nakhid, you had your hand up.

**Mr. Nakhid:** Can you hear me now?

**Mr. Chairman:** Yes, go ahead please, member Nakhid.

**Mr. Nakhid:** Well, it is quite—my question had changed focus now that—I would like to know why, I do not know if this is the forum, we do not have the Ministry of Education with us, why none of these boards have been alerted as to the means test? I mean, how are we to progress in the purpose of this Joint Select Committee, I do not understand. I really am confused now. But anyway, given that there has been some woeful miscommunication, obviously, by the Ministry of Education, I would like to ask all these boards, has there been any synergy between these boards in terms of getting these students with devices? Because I am looking at the data, and some of the boards are well placed in terms of students having devices, such as Cluny. I saw that in St. Joseph's Convent, Port of Spain, that everyone has a device, and Providence which is part of that board, I think it is a minimal percentage without, and then I listened to Mr. Rambarran who was very, very apt and focused in his presentation about people in rural areas not having. Then there should be some kind of synergy, I would hope, between the boards, and not rely on maybe state intervention. Is there a possibility for that to happen, or has there been any communication between these boards to have some kind of synergy between them?

**Mr. Chairman:** That is a good question, member Nakhid. And it speaks to, clearly some boards have better mobilization mechanisms and better support systems, and I think it is a very good question if there is any conversation between these denominational boards as to how those with more resources can assist those with less resources and close those gaps.

**Mr. Nakhid:** Exactly, since we as one nation intend to move forward, so I would really like to hear something from—

**Mr. Chairman:** Anyone want to jump on with that? Mr. Hosein.

**Mr. Hosein:** As far as I am aware, most of the communication from the Ministry to the school— ASJA Primary, sorry to the ASJA Board, it comes through the principal. Even the principal does not inform us, then we are not in the know. So, I am suggesting that there is a direct—if the Ministry decides to send a communiqué to the principals of the various schools, please send it to the board, because all the boards have a secretary.

**Mr. Chairman:** Mr. Hosein, the question from member Nakhid is, you are representing various boards here.

**Mr. Hosein:** Right.

**Mr. Chairman:** Various boards who have indicated that they seem to have the number of devices they need almost covered, and there are some boards who have indicated that there is a gap in the students who have devices, and a shortfall. And please correct me if I am wrong, member Nakhid, he is asking if there has been any collaboration by the boards or between the boards as to how they can best serve the needs of all students if some have better mechanisms for mobilizing, or resources, or not? Has that happened in your opinion?

**Mr. Hosein:** I thought, if I heard member Nakhid, he said is there a synergy between the boards and the Ministry of Education, if I am correct.

**Mr. Chairman:** And that is what—

**Mr. Hosein:** Okay. We have mobilized to ensure that all our students receive devices. As I indicated, we have a minority, about less than 10 per cent who—

**Mr. Chairman:** Then the question, Mr. Hosein is, have you collaborated with any other boards?

**Mr. Hosein:** Not to my knowledge.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. Mr. Rambarran.

**Mr. Rambarran:** Through the Chair, yes. I think it is fair to say that we have not had the sharing of our financial resources between the boards. That is a fair statement. That is how we have always operated. What we do share, we do have a forum, the denominational boards, we have a forum where we meet regularly, and through the secretaries of the boards and they share common concerns, and then through those common concerns they are prioritized and there is an engagement with the Ministry of Education. But, typically it all comes down to lack of resources, lack of focus. That tends to be the response, but I would like to say though that we do meet and we do discuss solutions, some are taken sometimes, and the majority are not. But the reality is that every board has had to go out—and I want to explain why it is difficult to have this pooling of synergies between boards.

We run community-based schools to a large extent, so what happens is that depending on the community, the strength of that community, you can get—we get sponsorship from the businesses in those communities and from the alumni of those schools. Because fund raising is at a local level for people to feel emotionally attached to a school. Then what happens, there is intervention by the boards, certainly by our board, at a broad level to provide resources. But again, all boards are strapped with financial resources. So, simply put, we do not share in terms of financial resources or physical resources with other boards. We share ideas for improvement of the system.

**Mr. Chairman:** And while I take your point, I think under pandemic crisis conditions, if one board can provide resources and laptops and devices for 8,000 students, it means that they probably can get 2,000 or more devices to give to another board that may be in need. And that is just the suggestion I think member Nakhid may be giving. Mr. Rambarran, you have a contribution. Sorry, go ahead, Mr. Ramdhanie, sorry. Mr. Ramdhanie.

**Mr. Ramdhanie:** Yes, as the Secretary of the Association of Denominational Boards, we have met and it is only this morning we have a proposal for low-cost Internet that we would be sending out to all the denominational boards through the chair of the association, Mrs. Mangroo, from the Catholic Board. We have been in contact with some providers to get some low-cost Internet, and that would be rolled out shortly.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. Member Singh.

**Mr. Singh:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman. A quick question to all the boards represented here today. I have listened to everyone speak about the lack of connectivity. I am happy to hear Mr. Ramdhanie's point just now in relation to a low-cost Internet package proposal. But my question is really geared towards the connectivity side of things, because in listening to all the boards this morning, Mr. Chairman, most persons indicated that they have issues where connectivity—some schools in rural communities and so on. So, in some of these areas whether the students have devices or not, the Internet connectivity still will remain a problem. My question is: What as boards, as representatives and persons receiving devices from TATT, what have the boards done in making representation to these current Internet providers to have that problem rectified and fixed, especially in relation to some of these areas that we deemed rural, that do not have Internet connectivity?

**Mr. Chairman:** If I could start with Mr. Hills-Wilson on that one please.

**Mr. Hills-Wilson:** Yes, Sir. Principals have been checking to find ways and means to get around that problem. We are aware that some connectivity has been given on a temporary basis for three months, and they are using those, and still exploring other possibilities for the schools.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. Let us go to Ms. Maharaj, on the same issue, question, please.

**Ms. Maharaj:** Yes, Mr. Chairman. Like Mr. Hills-Wilson, we have been hearing from our principals, especially in those areas where connectivity is almost non-existent, and the principals have, because of the different needs of the different areas, some principals have reached out to Internet providers and some of it has been, shall we say forthcoming, in an advantageous manner and, well, not all have, you know, but a few of them who have done it, not all have panned out. But, there has—

**Mr. Chairman:** What does that mean? What has happened in the advantageous manner that you are happy about?

**Ms. Maharaj:** Okay. All right, when I say advantageous manner, there was something that they were able to work out so that the children can have connectivity. The school as a matter of fact, the school and for the various homes that there can be connectivity. That is what I mean, in an advantageous manner.

**Mr. Chairman:** Is it that they have provided connectivity where there was none or they have given preferential rates to schools and for homes?

**Ms. Maharaj:** They have provided where there was none. Right, in one or two cases where—

**Mr. Chairman:** Have you gotten preferential rates like packages and deals?

**Ms. Maharaj:** I would not say—I would have to say, I cannot go with saying whether they got preferential rates, but I think something preferential was done for them.

**Mr. Chairman:** Okay, thank you. Member Singh, you want to continue?

**Mr. Singh:** Yes, Chairman, I think, in terms of the connectivity, just coming back to that, most persons in Trinidad and Tobago would know, especially if you have a mobile device, there are certain areas in Trinidad and Tobago might be deemed dead spots if you want to call it that. So, the direct question was really, what are we doing to ensure that there is proper connectivity, access data and whatnot in especially the rural areas, by these service providers? Because in my estimation the landscape and the geography of Trinidad is fairly small in relation to the coverage part of things, and I think it is extremely, you know, difficult to understand that there are still parts of Trinidad and Tobago that if you have your phone, you would not be able to receive a phone call and much less access data. So, in relation to that, what are the boards doing? Are they lobbying? Are they meeting with TATT?

**Mr. Chairman:** Member Singh, if I could intervene, I just asked the Secretariat, because of the information that we just need in our conversation, to see if we can get—have some—both major telecom providers to come before us next to see, so we can ask them the very questions.

**Mr. Singh:** Yes, I think that is an excellent idea, because while the boards come every, you know, come out with their points about connectivity, I think we really need to get a clear idea of the service providers and their reach and their coverage in relation to the boards. So, thank you, Mr. Chairman.

**Mr. Chairman:** All right. Member Beckles.

**Mrs. Beckles-Robinson:** Yes, thank you.

**Mr. Chairman:** Go ahead please.

**Mrs. Beckles-Robinson:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I want to support your recommendation for TATT to come before the Committee, because I think we need to have a really good appreciation as to what are some of the challenges faced that are faced in terms of broadband connectivity, especially for the rural communities, so we can have a better understanding as to exactly whether—I mean, you have one issue which is the actual, whether or not they have devices, but then you have the other issue as to connectivity and the challenges that some students are facing in terms of where they live and the ability to be able to access the connectivity. Thank you, Sir, I support your recommendation.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you, and the recommendation is also in relation to TATT, the telecom providers themselves.

**Mrs. Beckles-Robinson:** Yes, and the providers. Thank you, sure.

**Mr. Chairman:** The Anglican Board wants to make a contribution.

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Chairman.

**Mr. Chairman:** Just before member Indarsingh, I think the person from the Anglican Board wants to just make a contribution. Mrs. Alexander-Titus, go ahead please.

**Mrs. Alexander-Titus:** Hi, good morning again. I wanted to respond to your question concerning boards collaborating, and yes, the Anglican Board is collaborating with the Catholic Board re low-cost Internet and low-cost devices.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you so much.

**Mrs. Alexander-Titus:** I am trying to remember the other question. I cannot remember the other question you asked that I was supposed to respond to, because I have been waiting a while, so if I can—

**Mr. Chairman:** Neither can I, but I apologize for having you waiting. Member Indarsingh, go ahead please. Member Indarsingh, you can go ahead please.

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Yes, Chairman, I concur with bringing TATT and so on before the Committee, but we are approximately one year-plus into this pandemic and I thought that while we have been asking the boards here this morning, what they are doing and if they are lobbying, I think that the Ministry



of Education should have been very, very proactive to get this information in terms of—from the service providers about the connectivity and what needs to be done. We would have all heard from the Minister of Finance in the budget presentation that MiFi devices and so on would have been given to areas where there was the need for hotspots to be created and so on. So, I hope that in going forward all these issues would be addressed.

Additionally, if I could ask, because we continue to focus on the devices and so on, but in this hybrid learning environment, have the schools been able, or the boards have been able to—collation in terms of probably mental health issues which are posing a challenge to children coping with this particular system and so on, and even from a teacher's point of view and so on in terms of implementing, assisting and supporting children in this particular environment, if there are indeed cases of mental health challenges and so.

**Mr. Chairman:** Member Indarsingh, that is a great question I had written down here. But just before we move on from connectivity and devices, there was a question I think that is relevant and related, and the question is to all the board reps here: Has the Ministry or have your boards been able to augment your IT support? Because several of the board representatives here have indicated that while people get devices, their devices are not maintained. We have a cadre of devices going out and we start to create a junkyard, and if you have been able to augment IT support for your various schools and even students who are at home, so that the devices that are obtained at this time are maintained, and we do not end up in a cycle of having to get new devices because they are not maintained. And anyone can start on that one before we go to member Indarsingh's very important question about a psychosocial support, even if it is through the Student Support Services. So, anyone wants to start on that?

**Mr. Hosein:** Yes, Mr. Chairman, thank you so much. Yes, we would support member Indarsingh's suggestion that the Ministry of Education should have been a little more proactive in lobbying the Internet providers for special packages for schools and for students. But more than that, Mr. Chairman, and I hope I am not ruled out of order, from the time we began the discussion this morning we have been talking about devices and connectivity, and the other three objectives we have not touched on, unless we decide to continue after lunch, like comparing and contrasting student performance, the systems method used to monitor and evaluate. When are we going to look at that? Because you would recognize we have been only talking about devices and connectivity. Thank you so much.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you so much. Any other board members have a comment about IT support?

**Ms. Maharaj:** Mr. Chairman, whatever IT support there is in schools, from our knowledge and from talking to our schools and our principals, some schools have been able to get within their—on their staff, and maybe a little outside help, perhaps sometimes, not all of them, eh, just a few schools, able to put together what you call an IT committee. From my knowledge, maybe they do not have any external support and so on, right? So that is all I can say about our Presbyterian Schools for IT support. Now, last year just when it appeared that schools would probably have to go virtual, I remember that the boards were invited to a meeting, well, representatives, with the Ministry of Education, and one of the, very early thereon, in that particular meeting, they were talking about, the Ministry of Education said that they would consider, not consider, actually work on putting up hotspots, getting hotspots put up in areas that really needed it. Now, it is a year later and I have to say that we have not seen that, the reality of that, or the realization of that. Okay? So in that case that is my comment.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. Let us move now to member Indarsingh's question to the board members about psychosocial support. Part of the data we have received last time around, I certainly remember we had the Ministry of Education Student Support Services, before the year ended was that the Student Support Services Division of the Ministry of Education was overwhelmed even before the pandemic, and now they have been flooded by calls with socio-emotional behavioural issues, and if you as boards have had that kind of feedback from your teachers and parents related to students having a difficult time making this sort of transition and coping with the online environment in their various denominational boards. Since Ms. Maharaj is here, you can start with that one please.

**Ms. Maharaj:** Mr. Chairman, from our knowledge, there are Student Support Services, right, officers and so on are assigned to schools. However, these are, they are put in clusters, so that you have a small group of people handling several schools at the same time. That is not working well, and I will tell you why. What I mean by that is that while many of our students and our principals when we meet with them, and we have been talking with them and the teachers as well, say that they do referrals, they do many, many referrals, but the support is not there, and I—

**Mr. Chairman:** What are the major concerns that students come to you with? What are their complaints? What are the major points of interest?

**Ms. Maharaj:** Okay, it will be behavioural, it will be, again, as Ms. Alexander-Titus mentioned from that socio-economic status are low, so those kinds of students—those students who are not monitored during the day and get into all kinds of activities, and of course like they mentioned some of the—there are children showing stress, real stress, and physical as well, eyes, headaches, that kind of thing, and some students are not—there are one or two students that cannot even be accounted for, and the

contact numbers that were given they do not pan out, and you know, you cannot really visit unless, you know, they go to the police station and say, well, we have not been seeing this student and so on, and so on, and how can we get to this student. Some of the social services people they try to, and they cannot find them. I would not say that is a very large number, but what I am saying is that, just one, one is enough for that kind of thing. Right? So that, one of the things that when we talked and we could recommend is really an increase in number of counsellors, guidance counsellors, guidance officers, social workers, and not only improving and enhancing the number in that cadre, but certainly, maybe there are too many schools that they have to service. So, that has been our experience.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. Ms. East, has that been a similar experience where you are concerned?

**Ms. East:** In Cluny schools, we have had similar experiences in terms of the challenges that the students are facing. Challenges of stress, of not coping with the online work, challenges of feeling isolated, and many of the issues that have arisen, we have directed the concerns to the Student Support Services Division using the usual formats of the referrals and so on. And we can say that the Student Support Services Division, they have really been very good in responding to a lot of the concerns. They have also put in place life skill sessions, workshops for the students, seminars for the students. Our schools have a compulsory form teacher period, one session per week, where life skill programmes are implemented to help the students to cope, and SSSD has been very helpful in facilitating programmes during that time.

One of the main concerns we have is that because the SSSDs are overwhelmed, you send the referral now and the social worker and the guidance officer will respond, they will receive it and so on, but it takes very long sometimes for them to meet with the student and to resolve the issue. Sometimes they take weeks, by the time they get to the student, there have been other interventions done by the form teachers and deans and so on, to try to resolve the issue. So I think it is in terms of the timeliness of the response from SSSD that needs to be improved really very significantly.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. I expect Mr. Hosein to be very happy now, I have moved to curriculum, and how—

**Mr. Hosein:** On the question—

**Mr. Chairman:** I have not asked the question yet, Mr. Hosein.

**Mr. Hosein:** Sorry, sorry, sorry.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you so much. How have the boards been able to—what is your assessment on the adapted curriculum for the hybrid online system in terms of the teachers' ability to deliver the curriculum and its impact on the student learning? And since Mr. Hosein is there, I am happy, I know

he is eager to go.

**11.50 a.m.**

I think your mike is muted, Mr. Hosein.

**Mr. Hosein:** The teachers are coping pretty well with the online curriculum. It needs a bit of tweaking though. They seem to be comfortable with—it still unmuted? No. They seemed to be very comfortable with the online teaching. However, if they are expected to do the online teaching from half eight to half two, together with going to the school where they teach and deliver the—pick up the assignments and drop off the assignments, when are they going to do this? If they leave between half eight, half two then the online classes will have to be put on hold for a short while and some of them do not live near to the school. So that is something we probably need to tweak: When would teachers visit the school to drop off and pick up assignments? When do they do that? Out of their working hours or not? That is something we all need to look at very carefully.

The curriculum itself, the teachers are saying that they are getting through with the online. They are able to tap in to resources online that would not be readily available in the traditional, physical classroom. So if there is something that needs to be done incidentally in the teaching process they can go online, pull it up online and show it to the entire class. So that is a plus, that is a positive development with the online teaching.

What they have found also challenging is the assessment—to assess the students. Because if you give an assessment at home and the student completes it, drops it in the school, we are not 100 per cent sure that that is the child's doing. The child may have gotten help and the performance on it, may not be a true reflection of the child's capacity and ability to perform. What they are also saying, and it is very challenging, is that if we have—and we have found out this and they seem to agree—if we have the true hybrid teaching-learning system, at the end of the term, we invite—we work out a roster or a schedule where the various classes can attend—

**Mr. Chairman:** Mr. Hosein—

**Mr. Hosein:** Yes?

**Mr. Chairman:** I think we went through this already.

**Mr. Hosein:** Okay.

**Mr. Chairman:** Okay. So while your suggestion is very noteworthy, that again depends on the advice of the Ministry of Health officials.

**Mr. Hosein:** Okay.

**Mr. Chairman:** Let us just stick with the curriculum and how you see the assessment being taken

place under these conditions for the moment.

**Mr. Hosein:** Okay. What teachers are saying, right now they use the Zoom provided by the Ministry of Education. What some teachers are saying and what teachers are saying—some are saying that they need to have—some of them have—they have taken out their own personal Zoom programme so that they can meet their students on a one to one basis—on a one to one basis. And this is something they need to consider, whether we should subsidize those teachers who would like to get another teaching media, the Zoom, rather than just the Google Classroom that is intended for all the students. Maybe we need to consider that.

**Mr. Chairman:** So students or teachers cannot use Google Meet or Google Teams to meet individual students?

**Mr. Hosein:** Yes, but when are they going to do it? They can use the Goggle Meet, they can use the Google Meet to meet the students but some of them are saying that they need some more time and not all—I am just reporting what was communicated to me.

**Mr. Chairman:** You are talking about the present timetable or roster?

**Mr. Hosein:** Yes.

**Mr. Chairman:** I understand it. Okay. Let us go to Mr. Ramdhanie.

**Mr. Hosein:** Sure.

**Mr. Ramdhanie:** Yes. The hybrid system, we have not been able to assess it properly because, as indicated previously by Ms. Maharaj, we are presently doing mostly online teaching and only recently the secondary schools came out and they are starting to do the hybrid learning. However, as indicated by many previous persons before, there are many challenges we foresee with the hybrid learning and I would not get back into that because it was mentioned before by other members.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. Mr. Rambarran?

**Mr. Rambarran:** Thank you, Chairman. Firstly, the positives. So when we are dealing with the majority who are digitally connected we find our students have become more IT literate. That has been an advantage we have seen. The downside though is that we find that the evaluation scores of the students, in assessing their performance, they are unreliable because we suspect—we do not know for a fact—but we suspect there is a lot of parental involvement in the assessment of students.

**Mr. Chairman:** Do you—and this goes for everyone here— do you have a mechanism whereby you can provide this type of feedback to the Education Ministry because they are the ones, I am presuming, who devise these assessment modalities. For example, I teach a university class or classes and very early on I realized that, well, you give them an assignment and the assignment is not consistent with

what you have seen their abilities were before, though it could be improved. What you do is you tweak it and say, okay, you get the assignment but we will discuss the answers in a segment of the class interaction so I will know if I question your answer, if you are au courant with what you have written. And I do not think you probably could do that on your own but certainly it is a suggestion that, given your experiences, you can give the Ministry to have more reliable feedback or assessment from the students. Because it makes no sense putting these assessment modalities in place, getting students to respond, with help from their parents or whoever, and it is not a true reflection of where they are in terms of their competence in the subject matter.

**Mr. Rambarran:** Yes, that is our concern because, you know, one of your other objectives was readiness for external exams and I guess it is only at that point we will get a sense of whether there is a true alignment between the evaluations scores we are seeing now and the external exam results. But at that point it may be a bit too late.

**Mr. Chairman:** Well said. Mrs. Alexander-Titus.

**Mrs. Alexander-Titus:** Hi. So, assessment—I have heard the other members and I am saying that at this time what teachers are required to do is look at alternative forms of assessment. So what some schools would have done, they would have looked at what is called a “performance task assessment”. As such, the child has to be in front of the teacher and perform whatever task they are being asked to complete. So, the thing is, it may be a bit lengthier because you are doing it one on one, but that was the best way that some schools found that they could overcome the challenge. And, of course, because it is performance task, you are not giving 50 questions. You are giving one comprehensive question that would assess all the skills that would have been taught during the term. So that is one way I do agree that any other way the assessment will not be reliable or valid, and that has been a challenge. And because parents would have been prompting children during the term and all of that, we did not go down that road of assessing—the continuous assessment became a challenge and hence, we have the performance task kind of assessment to try to treat with that.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. Mr. Bajnath and then Mr. Hills-Wilson, in terms of assessment and curriculum.

**Mr. Bajnath:** Yes. Assessment continues to be an ongoing challenge. However, the schools have devised ways and they share it amongst themselves, how they go about assessing the children and ensuring that what was actually delivered, is actually being understood. And as rightfully mentioned by other members, they are not being assisted externally, just to get good grades. So they have devised methods with—besides giving assignments, there are projects and also there are hard copy

assignments that need to be done and sent up. So they have developed various methods and we are now in a better place of assessing students than we were before. So we have moved and we are seeing signs of assessing the students in such a manner that we could actually ensure the deliverables are met.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. Mr. Hills-Wilson from the Baptist Board of Management.

**Mr. Hills-Wilson:** All right. Time had also mitigated against us in some cases. However, the teachers are using similar, as my colleagues would have said, similar ideas and even some extra classes, getting our students to do assignments and to pass them back in, and to ensure that work is covered.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. Member Beckles. I have not heard from you for a while. Do you have a question or a comment?

**Mrs. Beckles-Robinson:** No, I am okay so far. I am all right.

**Mr. Chairman:** Okay. Mr. Singh?

**Mr. Singh:** I am good, Mr. Chairman.

**Mr. Chairman:** Mr. Nakhid? Member Nakhid, sorry.

**Mr. Nakhid:** Everything is fine, Chairman. Thank you.

**Mr. Chairman:** Member Indarsingh?

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Chairman, I would have lost the connectivity for a while so I am a bit out of the loop in terms of what you are asking.

**Mr. Chairman:** All right. I want to go to the issue of the students who are back in schools now and what your experiences have been in terms of how they have re-assimilated into the physically space, how they are coping with the need to social distance. Because in many cases, they are young and they have not seen each other for a while and younger persons sometimes forget the rules and guidelines, and how they—because this is really, the crux of hybrid of online and in-classroom situations are taking place. Because in many of these cases, they also have online sessions because they are not in schools every day and what their experiences have been. Let me start with Mr. Ramdhanie on that one and then we would go down the line.

**Mr. Ramdhanie:** I am not sure if you could clarify something. You mentioned Standard 5 students earlier are out?

**Mr. Chairman:** That is my mistake. Forms 4 and 5 and, I think, Form 6.

**Mr. Ramdhanie:** Okay. I just wanted to clarify that. So the secondary school students, unfortunately, they—it is easier for them to follow the guidelines of social distancing and managing under this pandemic. They are coping quite well. The teachers are also coping well in the secondary schools with the limited time, so far, with the hybrid learning. We have not had any negative experiences thus far.

I think it is being managed quite well by the secondary school principals and the teachers. However, I am not too sure if that would happen when the primary school students return in April.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. And what happens—is it that they have extra teachers? Because if I am a secondary school teacher and I am in a classroom, am I covering all the students back out or are some still home on particular days and how that is being reconciled or is not an issue?

**Mr. Ramdhanie:** That is not an issue at our schools because it is being managed properly where the students who are in school are mostly there for their labs and so, and not for classes as such. And it is being timetabled in such a way that it is not affecting the other students who are—*[Inaudible]*

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. Mr. Rambarran, what has your experience been, and then Ms. Maharaj. Oh, but she is primary school. So Mr. Rambarran first, sorry.

**Mr. Rambarran:** Mr. Chairman, we are all primary schools so we have—

**Mr. Chairman:** You are primary schools. Mr. Hills-Wilson, you are primary schools or are secondary schools included? Mr. Hills-Wilson? Okay, let us go to—

**Mr. Hills-Wilson:** Yes, Sir. Three primary schools, one secondary school and one preschool.

**Mr. Chairman:** And what has your experience been with the secondary school where Forms 4 and 5 are back out?

**Mr. Hills-Wilson:** Well, they are struggling in some cases but because the teachers are present with them, they are doing well. They are doing well.

**Mr. Chairman:** They are struggling but they are doing well. I am confused.

**Mr. Hills-Wilson:** Now what happened is that with the new system—shifting with the new system. All right? But they are gaining momentum, they are doing well.

**Mr. Chairman:** Okay. Ms. East from the St. Joseph Cluny Board of Education.

**Ms. East:** Forms 4 to 6 are back out using a hybrid timetable for labs, for modular exams and for practicals. What we have done is the teachers who are assigned to come to school, physically to school, to monitor labs and supervise IAs and so on, they will have their regular online timetable but they will set up asynchronous work for the students who are not at school. And asynchronous work would of course—the face-to-face work will be taking place in school with the labs. The students who are at labs in school or for practicals or modular exams, they may be missing some online classes as well and those teachers understand very clearly because we have put that as part of our system, that no new work is done at those times and the work that the students who are at school are missing, that work is posted on the classrooms and sent to the students. So far we have been functioning pretty well. The students at school are maintaining their social distancing. All of the health protocols are in place



because we did have the schools organized and prepared in September which, of course, did not happen. So far, the Cluny schools, the hybrid system is working quite efficiently.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. Mr. Hosein?

**Mr. Hosein:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. So far, we have had no reported problems at our six secondary schools. In the beginning, it was a bit challenging in that, you know, getting the norm, being the social distancing and the mask, but eventually all became acclimatized and so far things are working well. Now, the principals and the teachers, they have managed it well, not only with that but some of the teachers who are at presently teaching Forms 4, 5 and 6, they also teach the lower classes. And through the astute management of the principal and heads of the department, they have been able to tweak the timetable to ensure that the online and the physical classroom instruction, they do not interfere with each other. But we are going pretty good so far. Thank you.

**Mr. Chairman:** And Mr. Bajnath?

**Mr. Bajnath:** Yes. Everything has been put in place. The students have adapted well to coming out back to schools. One of the problems we have is we need to hire our private safety officers because we no longer have safety officers assigned to the schools. But so far, we have increased the relevant sanitizing and sanitizing stations. In some of the schools, we have increased staff just to ensure that when the students come out, they are in a secure environment. They are monitored and informed about the social distancing and their masks, and so far, it has been a success because at the end of the day, they will have both the online and the practical to do at school to ensure that their coursework and thing is completed. So, so far, we have not had any incidents and everything is running smoothly. Thanks to the principals and the staff of our secondary schools.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. Now, the next question has to do with the controversy that ensued last cycle with the varying results across the Caribbean region, vis-à-vis CXC and what the boards think has been put in place in terms of preparation for their students, one, but certainly in terms of the concerns they may have moving into this next cycle. Do you think all the issues would have been addressed? Because it is part of the assessment regime now, in this case, an external examination—an external regional examination. Mr. Ramdhanie?

**Mr. Ramdhanie:** We have not had any feedback from our secondary school principals, whether they are comfortable with the issues being addressed or not.

**Mr. Chairman:** So no feedback yet?

**Mr. Ramdhanie:** No feedback at this time.

**Mr. Chairman:** Okay. Mr. Rambarran?

**Mr. Rambarran:** Sorry, Chair, we only have primary schools.

**Mr. Chairman:** Oh sorry, my bad. Mr. Hills-Wilson—do you have a response to that, Mr. Wilson, with your one secondary school?

**Mr. Hills-Wilson:** Not at this time, Sir.

**Mr. Chairman:** Okay. Ms. East?

**Ms. East:** We are not very clear on whether the issues have been addressed because initially when the students wrote exams last year, there was nothing that was untoward in terms of how the results spanned out eventually. In terms of—we had some concerns about some of the results, as most of the schools did. But in terms of what the issues were that led to those results being what they were, those issues have not been clarified by CXC to our knowledge and to our satisfaction, we are not clear.

But what I will say is that all of the students who are in Form 5, who are preparing for exams, they have been subjected mainly to formative or continuous assessment. They have not had the opportunity—those students have not had the opportunity to have an experience in the exam format that they will be expected to sit come June and that is a major concern that we have.

**Mr. Chairman:** So you have not any sight of changes in the format or administration of the exam for the students?

**Ms. East:** Yes. So the regular format for the exams for CXC, we expect that to hold for this year. But those students have not had the experience, in terms of mock exams and summative exams. So they have been only subject to—only been given continuous assessment, formative assessment. But the external exam is largely summative. Yes? And that is a concern.

**Mr. Chairman:** That is very important. Thank you so much.

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Mr. Chairman—

**Mr. Chairman:** Yes?

**Mr. Indarsingh:** If I could find out, with your permission—you may want to tell me I am going a little off course. But on the issue of exam results and the issues being resolved and so on, are the representatives of the respective boards—could they tell us if CXC, through the Ministry, have communicated through the Ministry and the respective schools under their watch? Are aware of all the issues as it relates to CAPE and CSEC? Last year's results, has it been finalized and if they have been advised by the Ministry of Education when will the scholarship results be made public?

**Mr. Chairman:** Any of the board members want to comment on that or respond to member Indarsingh's question? About the reconciliation of those exams results as of last cycle, member Indarsingh?

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Yes.

**Mr. Chairman:** And as a result of those—the scholarships that will flow from those, is that the second part of your question?

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Yeah.

**Mr. Chairman:** Based on the exam results of course. Anyone wants to respond to member Indarsingh's query where that is concerned?

**Ms. East:** If I may, most of the queries have been resolved. Most of them have not changed—the grades have not changed. But we did get changes in some of the subject areas. We have not received any information as to when scholarships or if scholarships will be assigned to schools—to students.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. Any other question, member Indarsingh?

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Not at this point in time, Chair.

**Mr. Chairman:** Member Singh?

**Mr. Singh:** Chairman, I just wanted to go back to one concern I had and it is relating to the attendance of students in Forms 4 to 6. Are there any instances where schools have recorded any responses from teachers indicating to these students that they can go at the school but the teacher prefers to still remain at home via the hybrid system and via using the devices? Is there any case of that being recorded at any of the secondary schools thus far?

**Ms. East:** Mr. Chairman, may I ask, please, for the question to be repeated? There was a part of the question that was not clear.

**Mr. Chairman:** I think the question, if I am getting it from member Singh correctly, is if there have been any instances of teachers asking for those Forms 4, 5 and 6 students to actually continue with the online learning system as opposed to going into the classroom? Will that be correct, member Singh?

**Mr. Singh:** Yes, Mr. Chairman.

**Mr. Chairman:** Yes. My understanding is that most of these classes are to facilitate practical work.

**Ms. East:** Yes.

**Mr. Chairman:** So they would not be able to be facilitated online as readily. Would that be correct?

**Ms. East:** The students at the Cluny schools, the students who have been timetabled to return to school are the students who need to do practical subjects, modular exams and labs. So that you would have part of a class, in some instances, attending school, whereas the others will be functioning online. The students who—the intention, from what we gather, is that we not having all of our students coming out for face-to-face learning, for work that are can be done online.

**Mr. Chairman:** All right. Thank you. We are running close to ending in the next 15 minutes. So what I am going to do is give each of the members of the Committee a chance to ask any final questions that you may have and also position the minds of our stakeholders to your final comments in what would be a two to three-minute summation of what you think your major challenges are, based on what we discussed, and suggestions for solutions which I think are always very important in these types of discussions. So any members of the Committee want to ask any final questions? If not, we can go straight through—Member Singh? I saw your mike went on. Member Singh, you have a question?

**Mr. Singh:** No, Mr. Chairman. Thank you.

**Mr. Chairman:** Okay, thank you. So I am going to go straight to the representatives here and ask for your final comments that should not exceed three minutes and ask that you include in those, what you think are your pressing challenges in need of relief? We discussed quite a few of them this morning including devices and connectivity. And what are your suggestions for some solutions may be, moving forward, for the authorities who are listening or watching at this time? Let me start with Mr. Jeewan Ramdhanie from the Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha Board of Education.

**Mr. Ramdhanie:** Firstly, let me take this opportunity to thank you for the invitation to be part of this meeting here today. And like you said earlier, the major challenges that the Maha Sabha is faced with is, in fact, devices and connectivity, and we have somewhat been able to overcome some of those challenges. We do not foresee any major challenges with devices because with the roll out of the TATT devices and so on, that are coming on board, lower classes now—because we would have dealt with the Standard 5s and the Standard 4s in the primary school and the examination classes at the secondary level. So we look forward to the assistance with connectivity and even some of the devices for the lower classes, because our 30 per cent that we have shortfall, it is in the lower classes and the lower forms in the secondary schools. And we are of the belief that once we have this rectified, we would certainly be on our way to having this hybrid learning system successfully implemented in our schools. So I thank you.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you so much. Next we go to the Arya Pratinidhi Sabha of Trinidad and Tobago, Mr. Rambarran.

**Mr. Rambarran:** Firstly, I echo the sentiments of Mr. Ramdhanie. Chairman, thank you and your members for allowing us to provide feedback. So the first recommendation I would say is that we need to have a focused intervention on those students, you know, socio-economic status because as I said before, even if they have devices, even if they have connectivity, before the pandemic they were

already challenged. Subsequent to the pandemic, there are more challenges. Just providing devices and connectivity does not fix the problem. There has to be a surgical initiative for the students and you would find many of the students are in the rural areas. So that is the first point I would make.

Second point I want to make is given that for the foreseeable future, that hybrid learning is here to remain, we need to have some level of focused IT support for our schools. It cannot just be on an ad hoc basis where we depend upon the good will of our teachers and our parents.

The third point I would like to make is that, and this is a general point, echoing again the sentiments of Mr. Hosein. We ask that these type of statistics and the directives, through the various schools, that the boards be copied into it because we are here to help, these are our schools. We all are working for the same cause. You know, this morning I was pleasantly surprised that you had available these statistics that we just do not know. Okay? But again, thank you very much for allowing us the opportunity to provide our feedback. Thank you.

**Mr. Chairman:** What we would do—and there are some restrictions regarding the circulation of some of the data that the Ministry would have supplied while the enquiry is going on. But after the enquiry has been completed, which should be in the next couple weeks, we should be able to lift the moratorium and the statistics and be able to send those to you. Okay? So we will try to facilitate that.

**12.20 p.m.**

In addition to updating based on some of your submissions in your data presentations today, so thank you so much. Ms. Maharaj from the Presbyterian Primary Schools' Board of Education.

**Ms. Maharaj:** Mr. Chairman, I want to endorse what has been said so far by my colleagues who run the primary schools. I want to bring into focus just for a moment or two, and part of my closing, that we are now looking forward to our Standard 5 students coming out and these are the ones who would be writing the exams. So our concern is that there are one or two things that we would like attended to. We believe that the medical team for one doctor and two nurses for each educational district is not enough and that that should be changed and enhanced that schools—when the children came out and we talk about the stress level, and therefore, we need to increase the number of sessions held by guidance officers, and so on. And prior to the SEA exam, also that schools have improved infrastructure that abides with health protocols, sanitization stations, thermal scanners, and so on, and that we—

This question I would like to ask, considering that vaccination is not a mandate by law, what is the scenario for staff, teachers and administrators who choose not to be vaccinated against the COVID-19 virus? So I am—we also ask for addition— Well, I know the Ministry sent out to our principals

but it did not come to us, but we heard through our principals, for additional teachers for supervision for the exam. So we are glad about that and we really look forward to these kinds of things coming to our attention like, I think it was Mr. Rambarran who mentioned it. And I want to say thank you very much, Sir, for inviting us and these are my closing comments and our board's recommendations in a nutshell.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you so much, Ms. Maharaj. We go now to Mr. Michael Hills-Wilson from the Baptist Board of Management.

**Mr. Hills-Wilson:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I am also happy to have been here and for the comments given. We suggest that the Ministry of Education provide greater guidance on standardized methods for evaluating our students, and advise principals as well on performance management arrangements for our teachers. With this in mind, we hope that there will be some filling of vacancies for middle management, heads of department and deans. Thank you.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you so much. Ms. Debra East from the St. Joseph Cluny Board of Education.

**Ms. East:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I thank you on behalf of our board for allowing us this opportunity. In terms of recommendations going forward, we would like to recommend that we need IT personnel to assist at all the schools, there are some schools where we do not have any IT technicians and support staff. In particular, secondly, we would like to recommend that a review of the grant allocations be made to schools. For example, we have not received grants for practical subjects, and running of labs in COVID or under the pandemic conditions is totally a different situation to running labs under regular conditions. So, for example, you may have a group of students, a team of students at stations in labs; that cannot happen under COVID. Students must have individual stations and so on, and we need the finances to be able to fund those labs and practical subjects in the manner that pertains to and adheres to all of the health and safety protocols.

We also need for the Ministry to consider, through the Teaching Service Commission, the filling of middle management posts. There are some posts where, for example, in some schools you have a number of dean posts and you have all of the deans who were in those posts have either retired or left for various reasons and there are a number of vacancies that have been in place for years and have not been filled. Saying all of that, is to say that this education system and managing the education system is no easy task and particularly so on the pandemic conditions. And so, we thank the Ministry of Education for all of their interventions and all that they have done so far. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you so much. Let us go to Mr. Hosein from the ASJA Board of Education.

Your mike is still muted, Mr. Hosein. Could you unmute your mike please?

**Mr. Hosein:** Thank you so much. I am sorry about that. The ASJA Education Board would like to thank the JSC for inviting us once more to be part of this consultation, and we do hope that in the future, like Mr. Rambarran, I would echo the sentiment that hybrid learning would be with us for a while whether COVID is here or not. So it means to say that we have to get it right and we may have to tweak it.

The only two recommendations we have at this time is that we look for some appropriate model in the present situation to have assessment strategies so that the scores, the results would be reliable and valid. And finally, that the filling of vacancies that that be fast tracked because we have a number of vacancies like the other secondary schools, other boards. We have a number of teachers who have been assessed by the Ministry of Education as Teacher III, Teacher II, et cetera, but they have not been interviewed by the Teaching Service Commission, but thank you so much. It was a pleasure being here and take care. Be safe everybody. Thank you. Bye, bye.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you so much, Mr. Hosein. Mrs. Avion Alexander-Titus from the Anglican Board of Education.

**Mrs. Alexander-Titus:** Good morning again. Thank you so much for inviting the Anglican Education Board to this worthwhile meeting. At the heart of our concern continues to be the child because the child represents the future of our country and we are indeed concerned. It is indeed worrisome those children that we cannot reach. At the heart of the problem with such children would be the social issues of the family. What we have recognized is that the Student Support Services, many times the interventions would occur the child, and what really needs to happen is the intervention occur with the family.

There are several issues that need to be worked out there in order for anything to happen with the child. The social issues that we would have experienced with children during face to face instruction has continued or it has intensified given the fact that we are now online. We are therefore recommending that we look at family type interventions and not student focused interventions. Access is a challenge and we really would look forward to greater support and partnerships in that regard as well with the Internet connectivity. Thank you.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you so much. And Mr. Joel Bajnath from the Presbyterian Secondary Schools' Board of Education.

**Mr. Bajnath:** On behalf of the chairman and the board members, we wish to thank the Joint Select Committee for inviting us, and the contribution today was wonderful from the other members of the

various boards. It is something we could take back to our schools and we could use to increase the efficiency in this new system that we are trying to put in place. Just like everything, we realize a new system would have its teething problems, however, it has dawn to us that this is here with us for the future and it is something that we would need to fix and share, and our shared views would be shared when our representatives meet with the various boards and it is a learning experience that we need to conquer and take forward.

We would like to see, just like mentioned by other members, the staffing issues sorted out in the schools especially the part the service commission has to play and delays it takes. Bearing that in mind and all that is said, we do want to thank the Ministry of Education for the support and the interest they have shown in getting children back to school and all that they have been doing. So again, thanks and good day to everyone.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you very much. We would like to thank all our stakeholders who have appeared before us today. We would like to thank you all very much for being with us today. I would also like to take some time to thank the parents, the teachers, school administrators, the principals, school supervisors, the counsellors and the Education Ministry officials, this is a very difficult time for any country in the world. People have been pivoting and transitioning to new forms and modalities of education in the buoyant assessment. It is an ongoing process and that is why we had decided to have this enquiry because we think it is in the interest of not laying blame as such but finding out what is happening from the stakeholders who interface with our learners in the country to get your recommendations, to get your experiences. And we plan next to deal with the organizations that provide accommodation and remediation both, students and learners, especially those students with learning disabilities, in addition to, of course, including Tobago.

And as per our suggestions today, the Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago and the Digital Telecom Service Providers who certainly have a significant role to play, and any other entity that we feel could bring some light and information to these kinds of proceedings. On behalf of our Committee members including members Forde, Beckles, Monroe, Indarsingh, Sinanan, Singh, and Nakhid, we would like to thank you all for your participation and taking time to be with us today. And we would like to thank the Secretariat of the Parliament who always provide yeoman service and support to us. On behalf of the entire Committee, to our viewers and listeners, we thank you for viewing and we invite you to be safe. Thank you.

**12.32 p.m.:** *Meeting adjourned.*



**VERBATIM NOTES OF THE fifth VIRTUAL MEETING OF THE SOCIAL SERVICES & PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION COMMITTEE HELD IN PUBLIC ON WEDNESDAY, MARCH 17, 2021, AT 10.21 A.M.**

**PRESENT**

Mr. Paul Richards	Chairman
Mr. Esmond Forde	Vice-Chairman
Mrs. Penelope Beckles-Robinson	Member
Mr. Roger Munroe	Member
Mr. Avinash Singh	Member
Mr. David Nakhid	Member
Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh	Member
Mr. Julien Ogilvie	Secretary
Mr. Brian Lucio	Assistant Secretary
Ms. Aaneesa Baksh	Graduate Research Assistant
Ms. Nicole Brown	Parliamentary Intern

**ABSENT**

Mr. Rohan Sinanan	Member [ <i>Excused</i> ]
Ms. Allyson West	Member

**TOBAGO HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY–DIVISION OF EDUCATION, INNOVATION AND ENERGY**

Mrs. Sherry-Ann Rollocks-Hackett	Schools Supervisor III
Mrs. Nadine John-St. Rose	Curriculum Coordinator

**PRIVATE SPECIAL SCHOOLS ASSOCIATION**

Ms. Phillis Griffith	President
Dr. Shara Zoe	Ordinary Member

**SUPPORT AUTISM TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO (SATT)**

Dr. Radica Mahase	Founder/Director
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**DOWN SYNDROME FAMILY NETWORK**

Ms. Lisa J. Ghany	Honorary Board Member
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**TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO BLIND WELFARE ASSOCIATION**

Mr. Kenneth Suratt	Executive Officer
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**ASSOCIATION OF ADMINISTRATORS OF**

**UNREVISED**

**PUBLIC SPECIAL SCHOOLS TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO**

Mr. Derrick Mundy President

**CONSORTIUM OF DISABILITY ORGANIZATIONS (CODO)**

Ms. Jacqueline Leotaud President

**PRINCESS ELIZABETH SPECIAL SCHOOL**

Mr. Gerard Frederick Principal

**CASCADE SCHOOL FOR THE DEAF**

Ms. Francesca Monsegue Acting Principal

**MINISTRY OF EDUCATION**

Mrs. Lenor Baptiste-Simmons Permanent Secretary

Ms. Mary Bastien Coordinator, Guidance and Counselling

Mrs. Leticia Rodriguez-Cupid Coordinator, Special Education

**Mr. Chairman:** This is the Committee's third hearing with stakeholders pursuant to its enquiry into the effects of the hybrid learning system on student performance in government and government-assisted schools during the revised COVID-19 restrictions. Members of the public are invited to submit their comments via the Parliament's social media platforms, YouTube channel *ParlView*, via Facebook, and/or Twitter.

We would like to remind participants at this time that this is a virtual meeting and there are specific guidelines that will apply including, one, ensuring that your mike is muted when you are not speaking to help keep the background noise to a minimum. Two, we ask that you adjust your camera so that your face is always clearly visible in the frame. Ensure that notifications on your cell phone or other electronic device in your vicinity are muted during the course of this meeting.

I am the Committee's Chairman, Paul Richards. We thank you for being with us this morning, we appreciate your time. I would like to at this time invite members of the Committee to introduce themselves. Starting with Mr. Forde. Mr. Forde? Member Forde, are you there? Let us go to member Beckles. Member Beckles, go ahead please. Member Monroe. Are they hearing me?

*[Introductions made]*

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you, member Nakhid. The other member, members Forde and Beckles are also with us. We will not be having the presence of member Indarsingh and member Sinanan this morning who both have conflicting engagements.

At this time, we move to the representatives of the various stakeholder groups coming before us starting with the Ministry of Education and Mrs. Lenor Baptiste-Simmons, the Permanent Secretary, go ahead please.

**Mr. Ogilvie:** She is now joining.

**Mr. Chairman:** She is now joining? Well, let us go to Ms. Mary Bastien, Coordinator of Guidance and Counselling of the Ministry of Education. Okay, we seem to have been now logging in the members of the Ministry of Education. Let us go the officials of the Tobago House of Assembly, Division of Education, Innovation, and Energy, Mrs. Sherry-Ann Rollocks-Hackette, go ahead please.

*[Introductions made]*

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you all. Is there anyone who I have not identified? Okay thank you all for joining us this morning. Member Forde is with us again and member Beckles. Our four objectives in this enquiry are as follows: To assess the effectiveness of the hybrid learning system used by the government and government-assisted schools in curriculum delivery; to compare and contrast student performance using traditional versus hybrid learning systems for similar time periods; three, to examine the systems and methods used to monitor and evaluate student performance in the hybrid learning system; and four, to assess the readiness of the hybrid learning system to adequately prepare students for external examinations, or local examinations for that matter.

Once again, thank you all for joining us. I am now going to invite members of the various stakeholder groups and education divisions to make short opening comments, and then we will start our enquiries. Starting with the Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Education. Please unmute your mike, Mrs. Baptiste-Simmons.

**Mrs. Baptiste-Simmons:** Thank you Chair, and good day once again to members of the joint select committee, other participants, and members of the public. A hybrid learning system combines both face to face and remote distant learning strategies for delivery of the curriculum. The approach of Trinidad and Tobago to the hybrid learning system remains student centered and seeks to ensure that learners continue to have equitable access to quality education. As such, a multi-pronged intervention involving divisions and units of the Ministry of Education, as well as other Ministries, and major stakeholders has been employed.

The Ministry of Education would have commenced the hybrid learning system with effect from February 08, 2021, where the Ministry of Health allowed us to implement on a phased basis where

students will be coming out. At this time, we have Forms 4, 5, and 6, students at school and this is being facilitated to ensure that they can complete the School Based Assessments, internal assessments, and practicals ready for exams. On April 12, 2021, we are hoping that our Standard 4 students will be out for face to face sessions in schools.

We recognize that our students with special needs are the most vulnerable and at risk due to increased susceptibility to contagions as a result of pre-existing co-morbidities.

In closing, the Ministry of Education acknowledges that despite our best efforts, gaps in the education system delivery persists. As such, we look forward to sharing our experiences and gaining invaluable incite and possible solutions from fellow participants and Committee members. With these few words, I would pause and allow the Committee to take the lead in this meeting. Thank you.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you so much. Let us go to Mrs. Sherry-Ann Rollocks-Hackette, School Supervisor III, the Tobago House of Assembly, Division of Education, Innovation, and Energy, opening comments please.

**Mrs. Rollocks-Hackett:** Thank you, Chair. A pleasant good morning to all members of the Committee, and stakeholders, and members representing the Ministry of Education. The Division of Education, Innovation and Energy has been responding to the COVID-19 situation as far as schools are concerned. Our major lead usually will come from guidelines emanating from the Ministry of Education, but given our realities here in Tobago as a division we strategize to ensure that our students are taken care of. So, during this period we would have responded in various ways to ensure that our students their instruction continued and to ensure that learning took place in the way that it ought to take place, given the new platform that we found ourselves utilizing.

As such, we established several committees to roll out a road map as to how we will approach the continuing education of our students. We collaborated with various stakeholder groups including various units at our division and also with leaders within our community here in Tobago.

We also are aware that there are some gaps within the system at this point in time, but we have been working assiduously to ensure that our students are not disadvantaged. And also, as we began face to face classes in February, we also ensured that in various necessary sanitization that is required that all of those things were put in place. At this time, I will end my opening statement and go over back to you, Mr. Chair.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you so much. Let us go to the Private Special Schools Association, Ms.

Griffith.

**Ms. Griffith:** Hello, good morning again and thank you so much for this opportunity. So, from the perspective of the—[*Technical difficulties*]

**Mr. Chairman:** I think Ms. Griffith has some bandwidth problems there. Okay, Ms. Griffith you can take off your video because you have some bandwidth problems.

**Ms. Griffith:** Okay. Thank you.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you.

**Ms. Griffith:** Okay. Is this better?

**Mr. Chairman:** Much better, thank you.

**Ms. Griffith:** Okay, so again, good morning again to everyone and thank you for this opportunity. With the onset of the hybrid learning system—[*Technical difficulties*] our organization and our schools have had to come up with creative systems to ensure that teaching and—[*Technical difficulties*] the spectrum and they would require extra—[*Technical difficulties*]

**Mr. Chairman:** I think we are going to have to go to your colleague, Dr. Shara Zoe?

**Ms. Griffith:** Shara Zoe, yes. Go ahead, thank you, yes. If it is better from her end.

**Mr. Chairman:** Let us go to Dr. Zoe and see if we get a better—go ahead Dr. Zoe.

**Dr. Zoe:** Can you all hear me clearly?

**Mr. Chairman:** Yes, we can. Go ahead please.

**Dr. Zoe:** Good morning everybody. I will pick up from where Phillis left off. Well, we have not really been hybrid because we have not been a part of the phase to have gone back in so we are fully online still. Our students are benefiting from virtual classes in conjunction with prepared packages. Our committee the PSSA Association has met several times to see how we can strengthen each other, provide resources to each other, and even in the Ministry of Education as well, we continue to do that to meet to needs of our students. Thank you for having us.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you so much. Dr. Mahase of Support Autism T&T

**Dr. Mahase:** Mr. Chairman, members of the Joint Select Committee, distinguished persons, a pleasant good morning to all of you. Thank you for including the education of children with autism and other special needs in this session today. The majority of children with autism who are registered members of Support Autism T&T do not attend a government or government-assisted school. In fact, out of 150 members only 12 are currently attending a government school, while 18 currently attend

government-assisted schools. Together, they comprise only 30 per cent of our members between ages five to 18 years. Twenty per cent of the 150 children registered with us are enrolled in private schools, while the majority, 60 per cent, that is 90 children of a total of 150 are currently not enrolled in any educational institution.

The ones who are attending the government and government-assisted schools are the ones who we refer to as high functioning. Many parents consider themselves very lucky to have enrolled their children into a government or government-assisted school, as many children are turned away as schools cannot cater to their special needs.

For those who are students in the government and government-assisted schools, the transition to an online learning has been very challenging. Most of them—all of them actually are still in an online learning environment as opposed to a hybrid learning environment. Parents and caregivers have listed various factors which negatively impact on their children's access to good quality education. Some of which include: lack of teaching aids, standardized curriculum and evaluation, amongst others.

The children often have difficulties accessing information, they are distracted by noises from the other end and so on. And in order to make the learning environment a more successful one to students with autism, the parents and caregivers have requested that the Ministry of Education facilitate training sessions that will help teachers to engage in a more practical teaching style, that the whole system of standardized evaluation should be replaced with a system that will evaluate students on an individual basis, and that speech and occupational therapist should be assigned to particular schools and districts, even if it is to work in students in an online setting for now. Thank you very much. Back to you, Chair.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you so much. Ms. Ghany from the Down Syndrome Family Network.

**Ms. Ghany:** Good morning to the Chair, Sen. Paul Richards, and to all the distinguished members of this panel. Thank you to Dr. Mahase for giving that very succinct overview of the situation regarding children with disabilities, because I think that what she has said applies not only to children with autism, but also applies to children with other types of learning disabilities. In particular, children with intellectual disabilities.

At the Down Syndrome Family Network, we recently conducted a survey to ascertain the type of support that our members have been getting from the system. The early childhood care area, we had under 40 per cent of our students are enrolled in the early childhood care and about 43 per cent are enrolled in primary school. We have less than 10 per cent in secondary school, and about 20 per cent

at special schools. We also have about 20 per cent that are in no type of learning environment at all. During COVID we asked where were they provided with support? They were seen to get support from the Ministry of Education, it was less than 10 per cent. From the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services it was about 15 per cent. From the children's schools it was at about 35 per cent, and teacher assistance at about 15 per cent.

What resources have the children been given? Over 55 per cent said that they had been given no support. Lessons packages, 43 per cent were given lessons packages and less than 10 per cent actually received any type of home visit. We had less than 10 per cent as well having access to Wi-Fi. So that is a significant number of children who actually do not even have access to Wi-Fi. Some of them have learning devices but they cannot access them.

In particular, children with Down Syndrome, they learn from face to face type of activities. So they have been severely affected by this type of learning environment. In many instances they see devices as social type of recreational tools and not as an educational tool. And therefore, they have not been taught how to learn the devices in order to use them as an educational tool.

In addition to that, many of the parents are still computer illiterate or semi-illiterate as well, and cannot help with school-type activities. So we are facing a real crisis with regard to our children's disabilities and education, and we look forward to finding some solutions through this avenue. Thank you so much for allowing us to contribute.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you, Ms. Ghany. Let us go to the Blind Welfare Association, Mr. Suratt.

**Mr. Suratt:** Good morning Chair, it is a pleasure to be here and to be give this opportunity. COVID-19 has given us opportunities. We at the Blind Welfare Association believe that many things that we did not want to do, we have to do it now. And our students, the Blind Welfare Association, have been providing all who requested books in accessible format the Association has been providing learning material for children we have all over this country, whether they want it in digital format, Braille, large print, audio format. We also gave out tablets to over 30 children with Bluetooth keyboards so they could use it in the classroom.

We have one challenge where the Marrakesh Treaty was approved by the Parliament and the copyright law was amended last year. And thank you very much to the entire Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago for amending the copyright law so that printed material could be in accessible format.

When this process started 500,000 books were available via the ABC Accessible Book Consortium,

and WIPO World Intellectual Property Organization. The Government of Trinidad and Tobago together with NALIS, we are having a problem where outstanding from this Treaty, there needs to be an MOU signed between the Government of Trinidad and Tobago and NALIS with WIPO and ABC. Once that is done the amount of books in accessible format move from 500,000 to over 700,000 right now. We need that MOU to be signed. If that happens, immediately, all these books will be available to NALIS in an accessible format so we could redistribute it to children throughout Trinidad and Tobago. So I am asking the Chair, and Members of the Parliament present here today, if you could pursue that matter before it reaches one million books in accessible format.

This is one of the requests from Blind Welfare Association to the Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago and the Government, and NALIS. Please let us sign the MOU, get that MOU out of the way so we could get that part of the ball rolling.

Our children who are blind, the challenge we are having they are tactile learners or audio learners. Because of online learning this is done visual. We are suggesting that our children who are blind especially in the primary school system be given an opportunity, may not be five days for the week, but a couple days for the week to come into the classroom where the teachers could show them concepts, because if you are speaking about rows and columns, a child who is blind will not know that unless you could show them how it is done.

So, this is one of our requests if used with the hybrid system bring children back into the classroom, children who are blind or low-visioned to develop concepts so when they go back home and the teacher speaks about it, they could link it and the teacher can also use apparatus or devices at home to relate.

Our children at the secondary school level most of them already have the concepts in their head, so it may not be as demanding as the child who is in primary school. So this will be my opening statement for today's proceed. Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you so much. Let us go to Mr. Mundy.

**Mr. Mundy:** Good morning again to everyone. Thank you, Senator.

**Mr. Chairman:** Go ahead, we are hearing you. Could you speak up just a bit please?

**Mr. Mundy:** Certainly.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you.

**Mr. Mundy:** You hearing me clearer?



**Mr. Chairman:** Yes, we are.

**Mr. Mundy:** Okay. The challenges that we have regarding the public special school system is one of structure. I mention structure because of the fact that due to the current structure we will have primary schools, secondary schools, et cetera, the special schools are not catered for in the way it is supposed to be catered for.

In 2004, we would have made a transition from the Special Education Unit into that of Student Support Services Division and what that would have caused, is, it placed all public special schools under the various districts under school supervisors in the primary school system. The challenge we are having is that when you place us under primary school, okay, our students vary from age—pre-school age all the way up into their 20s, and obviously you cannot consider, you know, adults being primary school—of primary school age. We are—how to call it—requesting that you restore what you would have had regarding to the school supervision back into the structure you had with the Special Education Unit, where you will have school supervisors who are knowledgeable and aware of the needs of special schools.

The curriculum in the special schools you would have two curriculum or two curricula, okay. You would have the expanded core curriculum and the core curriculum. Our children with special needs must be properly engaged with the expanded core curriculum, because there in that curriculum is where they would be provided with the necessary skills and knowledge in order to access fully the core curriculum.

What this caused, this structure, the structure where we are currently forced into or under primary school, you are no longer having the transdisciplinary team or your interdisciplinary team that is required for developing individualized education programmes, and to ensure that these individualized education programmes are implemented the way they are supposed to be.

**10.50 a.m.**

The curriculum is—because of the fact that that is basically pushed aside by the Ministry—I am talking about the Ministry of Education here—the expanded curriculum is not taken seriously and the resources that we require to execute or to implement the Expanded Core Curriculum is not provided. Okay? For instance, if you have your students who might be blind or visually impaired, they have to do their orientation and mobility, your Braille or whatever, the expertise or the people who are supposed to provide that additional support, even your braillist, will fall under that transdisciplinary

team.

**Mr. Chairman:** Mr. Mundy, sorry to interrupt you but I am going to ask you to save some of that for our substantive discussion. Okay?

**Mr. Mundy:** Okay, fine.

**Mr. Chairman:** But we appreciate you giving some context. Okay?

**Mr. Mundy:** Yes.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. Let us go to—Ms. Leotaud had an emergency. Let us go to Ms. John. Ms. John from the Audrey Jeffers School for the Deaf, and these are introductory remarks. Go ahead, Ms. John, please.

**Ms. John:** Good morning everyone.

**Mr. Chairman:** Good morning.

**Ms. John:** From my perspective, at my school, our students were a little bit fortunate in that Digicel Foundation provided support for us early on and we were provided with devices. So all of our students have been working online with the teachers. So, in terms of that, they are getting a bit of education. It is not the best, in terms of the devices are a little small, and the teachers and the students need to be able to see at least the hands as well as the mouth in order to communicate. So apart from the small screen, not having that direct communication where they could really tell if the student is understanding, the students are learning and they are moving forward. It is just not at the pace that we would have liked if all things were as normal.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. Let us go to Mr. Gerard Frederick from the Princess Elizabeth Specialist School.

**Mr. Frederick:** Good morning Chair; good morning, members and fellow contributors. Special schools have recently been hampered in performing their mandated service to the most vulnerable in society. Poor funding, lack of trained support personnel, lack of qualified school supervision, as well as no curriculum support in the expanded core curriculum for specific disabilities are just some of the issues affecting student performance under regular circumstances. With special schools being forced to move to the hybrid system, the students have now been further disadvantaged. Now, added to the regular challenges, we now have to deal with ineffective use of technology, lack of specific training and technology for the students, staff indiscipline, social isolation of students and signs of fatigue on all stakeholders.

Parents of children with traumatic brain injuries, physical disabilities and multiple severe learning disabilities lack the training to assist in the educating of these special learners, hence the children need in-person education along with professionally trained support staff. There is a widespread assumption that because a student or a parent can use a mass communication device in their daily life, cell phone or tablet, that they are able to use these devices for education. The technology may be the same but there is a difference between using productivity apps for work, playing games “Facebook-ing” and online schooling. How can educators be expected to teach children or parents how to use the technology, when they themselves are now learning how to create and operate in these online classrooms, breakout rooms and assessment platforms. Thank you, Chair.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. And finally, Ms. Monsegue. Ms. Monsegue, sorry.

**Ms. Monsegue:** Hi, good day. You were correct the first time—Monsegue.

**Mr. Chairman:** Oh Monsegue, I am sorry.

**Ms. Monsegue:** Yes.

**Mr. Chairman:** Go ahead.

**Ms. Monsegue:** Cascade School for the Deaf. We are not operating in a hybrid system at this time. We are fully online still, fully remote. We have used the guidelines provided by the Ministry of Education, but have had to adapt those guidelines to suit the special needs of our children. For example, the amount of sessions we do per day, you know, synchronous and asynchronous, we have had to adapt that to suit our school, and within the school, adapt it to suit the ages and levels of the children. Our children range in ages from five to 17 years old, and as Mr. Mundy would have mentioned, we are not really a primary school, we are specials. Primary schools do not have 17 year olds, you know.

So we have had to find creative and innovative ways to reach our children at this time; all children have visual, tactile learners. And I must say that, you know, our teachers are really, really trying their best to reach our children. Thus far, we have 96 per cent of the student population being accessed every day. As Ms. John would have mentioned too we would have received devices from the Digicel and we are thankful, but we know, as educators of the deaf, that that is not the ideal type of device that they need to use, in terms of size and, you know, different things. So, we are facing the challenges but we continue to try and I hope to continue to work with our stakeholders in the best interest of our students.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you so much. Now, I want to start—thank you all for being here—and the Committee was very specific in its decision to want to deal with students with special needs and organizations that facilitate and support students and their families with special needs, as a whole. Because very often, these organizations are put with organizations that service typical learners and to be quite frank, they get a squeezed to the one side and we did not want that. We wanted to hear from the stakeholders because this is an important demographic to the Committee and to the education sector. And we felt, as a Committee, we needed an interface of its own to deal with this, because we think it is an important issue.

Because just by its very nature, a student with special needs is just that; a student with special needs, which means special accommodation, there are diagnostics. And in a very simple definition, clinical and functional special needs or additional needs refers to individuals who require assistance for disability that may be medical, mental, emotional or psychological. It is referred to as “special education needs”. And in other jurisdictions, there are laws that protect and support students with special needs, and we do not have that kind of—those kinds of legislative framework here in Trinidad and Tobago.

So we are heavily dependent on the Student Support Services Division of the Education Ministry. In the case of Tobago division, that is with us today, they have the remit over that and those students with special needs and their families, because their families are also an important dimension to remediating and providing support for these students. And just—part of the importance of this kind of interface is so that the general public gets a sense of what these students and their families are dealing with. And the misunderstandings and the misnomers are cleared up. There are, in a simple sense, 13 or so categories including: autism; deafblindness; emotional disturbance; hearing impairment; intellectual disabilities; multiple disabilities; orthopedic impairments; specific learning disabilities; traumatic brain disorder which was—injury, sorry—which was referenced earlier, visual impairment, including blindness; speech or language impairment, and other health impairments. And within those, there are other categories or degrees of disabilities that some learners have and have to deal with. For example, in the case of autism, it is a spectrum which includes, but not limited to, Rett; degenerative disorder, Kanner’s; Asperger’s, et cetera.

So it is a wide cadre of issues and challenges that needs special remediation support and diagnosis, not necessarily in that order. So it is important for people to understand the context in which we are

working here and the fact that if typical learners have faced significant challenges during this pandemic, one can only imagine that the pandemic has exacerbated the situation for learners with special needs who already face challenges in our environment and around the world. So I really wanted the public to understand what we are dealing with here, and the importance of focusing on this cadre of learners in Trinidad and Tobago that need and their families need the special support.

And I wanted to put this in the context of us understanding that we are in a pandemic and the pandemic has really curtailed economic activity in a large sense. The country was already going through some economic challenges but even with that said, education, as a sector, has and continues to receive the largest allocation of budgets.

In the last budget, education received \$7.973 billion, the largest allocation of any sector; followed by health, 6.05 billion and national security 5.22 billion; the Tobago House of Assembly received \$2.134 billion. And in the last five or six budgets, education was either first, in terms of the most money allocated or second to national security over the last 15 or so years. So education has always been either first or second in terms of receiving the largest allocation. And that is good because it speaks to a country that understands the importance of allocation. But my concern is how much of that is being directed to students with special needs in a real sense, and their support and intervention. So with that said, I want to open the questioning with the Ministry of Education in terms of very specific questions. What is the subvention that you have been allocated in the last three years, and actual subvention received or directed toward the student support services and students with special needs? Question 1. Question 2: how many students with special needs are registered in Trinidad and Tobago—and maybe Tobago can answer on their own—in your divisions; registered?

So we can start with those questions, to the Ministry of Education, please. Mrs. Lenor Baptiste-Simmons, the Permanent Secretary.

**Mrs. Baptiste-Simmons:** Yes, yes. Good morning. And I must admit I would not have pulled data with respect to our allocations and as you said, how much we would have received in releases and the allocations for our special needs students.

A lot of the information you requested would be across the Ministry in terms of what is allocated because it is not simply for resourcing or—because I would have to get from the development programme as well as the recurrent. So I must admit that I did not look at it from that aspect of the funding—

**Mr. Chairman:** I would appreciate that.

**Mrs. Baptiste-Simmons:**—but I hope one would appreciate that why we get the largest—

**Mr. Chairman:** [*Inaudible*]

**Mrs. Baptiste-Simmons:** Yes, that would be provided—why we get the largest, it is the largest Ministry that I think we ever had in Trinidad and Tobago; the Ministry of Education. We have 22,000 employees, I say it every day and the resourcing—and we have quite a lot of expenditure—is pretty high. So, with that as, we said I will provide you with the written response with respect to the aspect.

**Mr. Chairman:** How many students are registered as students with special needs in the Student Support Services Division?

**Mrs. Baptiste-Simmons:** Right, at this point, I would ask Ms. Cupid or Ms. Bastien to respond, thank you.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you so much.

**Mrs. Rodriguez-Cupid:** Good morning, Chair.

**Mr. Chairman:** Good morning.

**Mrs. Rodriguez-Cupid:** First of all, I would—can you hear me clearly?

**Mr. Chairman:** We are. Could you speak up just a bit, please? We hearing you but just a little softly.

**Mrs. Rodriguez-Cupid:** Good morning, again. Yes, first I would like to respond with regard to the—but in part not fully—to the allocation. We do have allocation to private special schools that is funded through our programme, through Student Support Services, that Vote is 29 million, that is usually the general allocation. We would have paid, through that Vote, a number of the—13 of the registered private special schools and the grants paid to special needs students in that regard. I can get probably more detailed information to you afterwards. But that—over the last few years, we estimated, I would say, around 14—we would have spent at least 14 to 16 million of that on the support for private students at the private special schools. Right? So with regard to that.

Your second question, with regard to the number of students, I just want to—I would like to reemphasize that the numbers that I would be reporting on here are students referred to Student Support Services. And of those—those with special needs—who we have identified.

Currently, we have approximately 3,365 students who have been referred to the Special Student Support Services, with suspected or diagnosed special education needs; 2,341 of those are, what I would say, actively being addressed by Student Support Services, pre-COVID. All right? Of that

number, only 1,214 of those children are actually now, during COVID, being accessed and receiving direct intervention.

**Mr. Chairman:** So less than half?

**Mrs. Rodriguez-Cupid:** Less than half of the total workload, yes, are being directly contacted at this time. Some of our students—and we acknowledge that a number of our students are still without access. Some students are—as our colleagues have mentioned—students are not—this is not the natural or the most optimum medium for many of our students with special needs.

I want to endorse some of the previous submissions in the welcoming remarks that many of our students benefit and would benefit more optimally from direct intervention.

Special education is a hands-on, very hands-on, very direct service. Student Support Services, in terms of students with special needs, we provide that therapeutic and educational support to the general education. Most of our students are serviced in the mainstream. In the general education classroom, they are serviced in the general and primary ECCE and secondary classroom. Student support staff support those teachers in delivery of the curriculum in those schools through the implementation of the IP, through the implementation of alternative strategies, through teacher education and support training, et cetera.

So the online—the transition to online has been very, very traumatic for many of our students and many of them have opted—many parents, many students do not access what is available even if they have devices. Many of them are still without devices and I know the Ministry of Education is addressing that by the continual roll out of the distribution of laptops, the distribution of tablets, et cetera. But we do acknowledge that there is a challenge for our students.

The online system has actually highlighted some of the difficulties that we know our children face on a daily basis. The prolonged time on the computer has actually triggered some emotional and sensory responses that are not ideal for our students. We have noted—and I would not have specific information on the numbers for that—but we have noted several reports of students with increased seizures, increased episodes, tantrums, et cetera, because of the prolonged use of the computer over the last year.

**11.10 a.m.**

**Mr. Chairman:** Now, you mentioned 3,365 students are either suspected or diagnosed. The international benchmark for any population is 10 to 12 per cent of the population, would be generally

persons who would be suspected of or diagnosed with special needs. So which means our level at 3,365 is quite low, and you get referrals. Is there a mechanism by which the Ministry of Education or the Student Support Services is more assertive in terms of trying to diagnose students with special needs to remediate them before it becomes a problem in terms of providing support?

**Mrs. Rodriguez-Cupid:** Okay. So, well, yes. So let me begin by, again, just emphasizing that the way we access students, we are a school-based service, so one, the child must be in school for the student to be picked up. That is one. The child is usually, must be enrolled at a school or in the process of being enrolled or requesting enrolment. Once the child is enrolled and the school or the parent—the school, the parent and sometimes the students themselves refer. We get referrals from all sources, even from other agencies, but the student must be referred. So that is the population I am talking about. So we have identified from those who are referred to us, 3,365 that are currently on our caseload, currently identified to us with special educational needs.

The Ministry acknowledges that there are many students who require further identification to the education system. So we do—well, we try what we call a needs assessment. This is not comprehensive research, but our officers, once we have officers at a school, through our needs assessment process, we do attempt to filter from the general student population, those students who are manifesting characteristics of special needs. In that, we are trying to assist the teachers in identifying the students who may have difficulty. We flag them as early as we can, and encourage the referral process.

**Mr. Chairman:** Before I open the floor to my colleagues—

**Mrs. Rodriguez-Cupid:** Sorry.

**Mr. Chairman:**—to the Permanent Secretary or any of the persons that she may feel can answer this question, Prof. Conrad Dennis—is it Dennis Conrad? I always get it wrong.

**Mrs. Baptiste-Simmons:** Prof. Dennis Conrad.

**Mr. Chairman:** Dennis Conrad who is the Director of Student Support Services, in an interface last year said that Student Support Services is under-resourced, overburdened even before the pandemic and the pandemic had exacerbated the situation significantly. My information—and this is to the Permanent Secretary—is that since the transfer to Student Support Services Division in 2004, the Student Support Services has never been more than 20 per cent staffed, inclusive of administration staff. Is that accurate?

**Mrs. Rodriguez-Cupid:** Should I answer this one?



**Mr. Chairman:** I am putting it to the Permanent Secretary, please.

**Mrs. Baptiste-Simmons:** Yes. Mr. Chair, as far as I am aware that could be accurate. What we have observed is that over the years, as you have said, there has been an expansion. There were years when it would have been up to 50 per cent, because I have been in the system for 20-odd years in the Ministry. So, within recent times, we have seen an expansion with respect to the Ministry of Education and the needs, special needs, as well as the number of social workers. So those numbers could be accurate at this time because most of the positions are in fact contract positions. And the Ministry of Education is set up—because these are not the only contract positions. Right now, when we have an advertisement say, for example, to fill a position in the Student Support Services, sometimes we might get close to 1,000 in terms of applications to process. It takes a very long time. So I know, but we have been working. We have really been trying to fill the positions, but then it comes to the fact of the economics sometimes, in terms of ensuring that we have sufficient funds that are allocated to be able to fill all of those contract positions, because the majority of positions you are referring to would be contract positions.

**Mr. Chairman:** Without directing this at you, one can imagine how families of students with special needs feel when the education Ministry receives the largest allocation, may not translate into releases, generally, for whatever reasons, and they hear that, at this point, with increased and intensified need that the Student Support Services Division, whose workload is ever increasing, is only 20 per cent staffed at this time, inclusive of an administrative staff. So how is that unit ever supposed to fulfil its function effectively in terms of remediating students out of the pandemic, now with the needs intensified? And we would admit that 3,365 students are not merely a scratch in the bucket compared to the number of students that we know as international benchmark may present are in need of either identification, diagnosis and remediation. It seems like we are short-changing students and families with special needs in this country. It seems like if, if I were a parent of a student with special needs, I would be very despondent at this point. And this is not directed at you. This is the cry that I have been hearing, and many of the stakeholder groups have admirably submitted a lot of data and information prior to this interface and the cries are all the same, we have been neglected.

**Mrs. Baptiste-Simmons:** Yes, and Chair, I, again, as I said, the Ministry of Education—and again you can look back at our allocation—as I said, it is 22,000 employees and it is across the board with teachers at primary, secondary and we have university. So the allocations would be large. We also carry

GATE and scholarships. So I am hearing you and, as you said, we need to relook at the funding and in terms of the allocation to be able to fill these positions. But I want you to also consider the sort of structure that needs to be put in place when you have a unit because, again, as you said, only 20 per cent, but this is like a small Ministry within a Ministry in terms of size to manage all of that and still ensure that the educational needs of all our students, from ECCE to tertiary, are effective. Thank you.

**Mr. Chairman:** I think you are making my point for me. Thank you for making my point. Let us go to Mr. Suratt and then I will open the floor to member Forde and then member Monroe.

**Mr. Suratt:** Thank you very much, Chair. The Blind Welfare Association, you raised the issue about percentage of persons with disabilities. At the last census taken, I think a lil over 50,000 persons were identified with a disability. The association advised, through our line Ministry, that we should consider using the Washington Questionnaire to conduct a survey to truly identify how many persons with disabilities in the country. So we are calling upon the Parliament, through yourself, if this could be implemented for the next census, use the Washington Survey Questionnaire which we provided for—it is a questionnaire developed by the United Nations. So if they could use that and conduct—it could be part of the census so that we could truly identify who are the persons with disabilities. Also, when we check birth rates in this country and the number of children in school, we would certainly see there are a lot of children with disabilities who are not in the school system.

And, finally, we are suggesting from the Blind Welfare Association, not all children need student aides. Our children who are—there are two types. Well, we look at the children who are just blind, like, their dominant disability or their only disability is blindness. They really do not need a student aide. What we are suggesting to the Ministry of Education, create itinerant teachers, so they could go to the different schools, work with the school, work with the teacher and work with the students to give them the skill set that they would not usually get in a school system, but how to cope with their blindness. Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. I am going to ask, in the most polite form, because we have a lot to get through, that contributions be as succinct as possible. Mr. Frederick followed by Dr. Mahase and then Ms. Griffith and then we will go to member Forde. So, Mr. Frederick, you are next, please. Go ahead.

**Mr. Frederick:** Yes, Chair. One of the things that need to be highlighted, Student Support Services Division can only speak to inclusion education. They are designed for inclusion education, and yet they are tasked with partnering with regular special schools which do not fall under that. And I think,

funding-wise, special schools need their own unit that is not so stretched with trying to deal with the entire education population, and still try to service us and give us the assistance that we need. We need beyond teachers. We need the technocrats. We need the mobility specialists. We need the occupational therapists. We need speech therapists. We need counsellors in the school. Imagine a child that is born with no voice, no hand movements, they basically only move their eyes. How is that child communicating? That child is emotionally locked away from communication. And, yes, we have the technology, but who is training the teachers to use the technology or training the child six to seven hours a day in how to use eye-control technology.

Also, most of the information that you requested concerning numbers could be found in the Ministry's recently released 2020 Annual Statistical Report. A copy should be made to the Committee. It has a lot of the numbers in: How many children with disabilities are recorded in the public school system. Thank you for this opportunity.

**Mr. Chairman:** What document is that again, please?

**Mr. Frederick:** That is the 2020 Annual Statistical Report of the Ministry of Education.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. Dr. Mahase?

**Dr. Mahase:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman. There are some serious issues regarding the hiring of teaching aides. There are cases where the contracts of the teacher's aides hired under the OJT Programme have ended and the students are left without an aide. These teachers' aides were told to reapply under the Ministry of Education and they have been waiting for a response on their application status for months now. In the meantime, the students are left without a teacher's aide and this has impacted negatively on their learning and development. I will like to ask how is the Ministry of Education addressing this disconnect and the rehiring of teachers' aides. Thank you.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. Ms. Griffith and then Member Forde, please.

**Ms. Griffith:** Thank you so much, Mr. Chairman. I am leaving my camera off because of the connectivity issues.

**Mr. Chairman:** That is all right. Thank you.

**Ms. Griffith:** Okay. So mention was made about funding and so on. So the Private Special Schools—  
[*Technical difficulties*]

**Mr. Chairman:** That is a really bad bandwidth problem there Ms. Griffith. We will have to try to get back to you. Let us go to Mr. Mundy and then member Forde, please stand by. Mr. Mundy, go ahead

please.

**Mr. Mundy:** Thank you. The whole problem regarding these special schools, as I indicated earlier, had to do with the structure of the Ministry of Education, okay? Because we are supposed to be able to garner all those figures that were requested of the Permanent Secretary, okay? The fact that we do not have what you would have called a division of special and inclusive education, focusing solely on all schools with children with disabilities and a curriculum—you do not even have a curriculum officer. There is a post for a curriculum officer for special education that is not even filled. Okay?

Now, our public special schools recently would have, with the whole COVID situation, none of our special schools would have been provided with the basic necessities for COVID—sanitizing sinks, sanitizing stations, hand sanitizers, et cetera. All of those things would have been provided to the regular primary and secondary schools. When we asked about the special schools, the answer was, “it is not in our quote, you have—your funding is different”. But we cannot seem to be able to find out how much is our funding for our special schools, et cetera. I will not go on too long, but this is the disrespect, let me put it that way, that our public special schools face, even basic infrastructural and health and safety challenges that you would probably have in a regular school. But in a special school you have to be extra careful with our children special needs.

The basic resources to provide our students, for instance, if we have to provide packages, the school for blind children has no Braille production unit. The school for blind children has always been providing Braille material for our students and students in the mainstream schools. The equipment, when we were locked out of Santa Cruz in 2017, a lot of the equipment is missing. Okay? So we have to take our children with special needs seriously, right, and provide them with the necessary resources so that they can, at least, function in a basic manner.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you, Mr. Mundy. Let us go to member Forde. Member Forde, go ahead please.

**Mr. Forde:** Thank you, thank you member, again. Good morning to each and every one, good morning to Trinidad and Tobago. Again, like all the other commentators that went before me, my question is directed, again, to the Ministry of Education, and it is in sync with what the Blind Welfare Association mentioned, the Down Syndrome association, the whole consortium of disability organizations, and the question is: In the submission of the Down Syndrome and all the other organizations, they highlighted one of the shortcomings of the blended hybrid learning system and I quote:

There is a need for dedicated resources to formulate programmes and educate parents and teachers and aides on how to use the system.

Right? And my question this morning is: Has the Student Support Services Division of the Ministry of Education conducted training sessions with parents or special needs teachers to successfully optimize the virtual learning environment for the benefit of special needs students in Trinidad and Tobago? And I think that question is in sync, Mr. Chairman, with all the other questions and the comments made by all the previous speakers from the various associations represented here. Thank you.

**Mr. Chairman:** Education Ministry, do you care to respond, please?

**Mrs. Baptiste-Simmons:** Yes. I will also ask Mrs. Cupid or Ms. Bastien to assist where necessary. As COVID-19 and in terms of the lock down for our students, the Ministry of Education would, in fact, have taken an initiative to ensure that all teachers were trained, as well as special needs. So before me, up to this week, on Monday, the head of that unit was training persons in special education needs, the teachers. So I have before me quite an extensive list of training that had been conducted. That unit has also reached out to DRETCHI, the Autism Society, the School for the Blind and the Lady Hochoy Home in terms of ensuring that they were invited to participate in the open educational resource, hosted by our training unit. And I have in front of me, quite a lot of training that has been conducted. Starting, we had October 20<sup>th</sup>, I had 108. Define Blindness and Visual Impairment, October 27<sup>th</sup>. All of these are training and I have quite a number of persons both at the secondary, the primary and special needs teachers, everyone there. They discussed techniques to help communicate with students who are blind and visually impaired, I have 93 attendees on that date, November 3<sup>rd</sup>. And recently March, as I said, March 16<sup>th</sup>, we had the training. We had 358 in terms of total attendance.

So from October to March I have quite a lot of training sessions that have been held. As we said, we know it is not going to be totally adequate. We have also targeted parents and we have put together an entire schedule because we have been targeting parents as well, and that schedule is also rolling out.

**Mr. Chairman:** When these teachers are trained—

**Mrs. Baptiste-Simmons:** So, the Ministry of Education had taken that initiative. Hello?

**Mr. Chairman:** Madam PS, when the teachers are trained, are they being trained for a specific disability that has been diagnosed?

**Mrs. Baptiste-Simmons:** What we have been doing is that well, we work, we target the specific areas

and those who came on board. What I was advised is that my team would have reached out to a lot of our stakeholders, as you said, in the various associations. Specific ones responded and we have been working with them specifically to ensure that those resources and the training are rolled out. But we have also had the general training for all. So all of them are identified. Deaf and hard hearing, I have here; accessibility in neurodiversity; learning with learning disabilities; students with executive functioning challenges. So it is an inclusive education. It is quite a lot of training that is being rolled out at this time. It is part of our programme.

**Mr. Chairman:** I do not want to get into the debate about whether it is inclusive or not inclusive because it is not inclusive. You know that.

**Mrs. Baptiste-Simmons:** Well, I know, but what I am stating is that my team, what we had done is that we tried to target—because everything is online and one of the things, I must admit, is the response that I got from the team, in terms of timelines and ensuring that every one—that we were trying to bring everyone on board in terms of training as well as being able to provide them with the devices.

**Mr. Chairman:** And I just want to—I know you are in the hot seat here and you have to field the questions because it is the education Ministry you are representing, but you will also hear the frustrations with some of these groups because the submissions they have sent to us, in large part, have indicated that there seems to be a communication issue with the Ministry of Education from most of the stakeholder groups that have sent submissions, in terms of turnaround and response time—and these are the NGOs, primarily—in terms of the turnaround time for communication responses and appeals for assistance and remediation. So, while it is not directed at you personally, you are representing the education Ministry. So I just want to make sure that you are not taking it personally.

**Mrs. Baptiste-Simmons:** No, no, I am not taking it personally. So can I ask my team, Ms. Leticia Cupid, to respond—

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you so much.

**Mrs. Baptiste-Simmons:**—to what you would have just said in terms of the turnaround?

**Mr. Chairman:** Yes. Thank you.

**Mrs. Baptiste-Simmons:** Ms. Leticia.

**Mrs. Rodriguez-Cupid:** Could you hear me?

**Mrs. Baptiste-Simmons:** Yes, we are hearing you.

**Mrs. Rodriguez-Cupid:** Okay.

**Mr. Chairman:** Yes, go ahead please.

**Mrs. Rodriguez-Cupid:** Could you repeat the last question? I lost audio.

**Mr. Chairman:** The question has to do with most of the submissions that we got from stakeholder groups, and these are primarily NGOs who are working on the field, picking up the slack, as it were, the gaps, because of the shortcomings at the Student Support Services and, generally, that they do not receive timely responses for communication, generally, or intervention from the Ministry of Education. They said and even if they receive an acknowledgment of the communication, the response, the practical response, is almost non-existent, so it is frustrating.

**Mrs. Rodriguez-Cupid:** Well, I am not sure which specific communication we are referring to, because if it is with regard to student referrals.

**Mr. Chairman:** Yes, it is student referrals and appeals for assistance and support.

**Mrs. Rodriguez-Cupid:** So, yes, we do acknowledge with the level of staffing, we would recognize that with the number of persons, particularly with special needs, who need to be serviced by the system, the limitation of staffing does impact the turnaround, the time, and we acknowledge that, because it is just so many a limited number of officers can do, keeping in mind that we receive referrals from various sources. The most of our—well, Student Support Services Special Ed Unit receives referrals from almost every organization in addition to every—

**Mr. Chairman:** What is the quantum of requests for assistance you have received in the last nine months?

**Mrs. Rodriguez-Cupid:** Wow. Mr. Richards, I would not have that exact number in the last nine months.

**Mr. Chairman:** Give me a ballpark figure.

**Mrs. Rodriguez-Cupid:** Remember it is a rolling—I will ask Ms. Bastien to give me in the last nine months the hotline figures.

**Ms. Bastien:** Chair, based on our feedback coming from the number of calls received via the hotline with regard—

**Mr. Chairman:** Go ahead, we are hearing you.

**Ms. Bastien:** Are you hearing me?

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

**Ms. Bastien:** Sure. Based on the hotline calls that we have been getting since March of 2020, we noticed that almost on a daily basis about 15 calls may come requesting some sort of information or for additional assistance for students with special needs. So it can be quite a bit.

**Mr. Chairman:** Mrs. Rodriguez, I understand you have been able to make some progress and you have eight Clinical Psychologists and eight Social Service Workers. Could you give us a breakdown on that? And what is their caseload per officer at this point? And I am going to ask member Monroe to stand by with his questions please. So, Mrs. Rodriguez, could you give us a sense of what the staffing is like and the caseload per officer?

**Ms. Bastien:** So I can begin by giving the staff information for the psychologists that we have on staff. Currently, we have five Behavioural Specialists. We have nine Clinical Psychologists and nine School Psychologists.

**Mr. Chairman:** So 23 professionals?

**Ms. Bastien:** Currently in that unit.

**Mr. Chairman:** So that is about 40 to 50 per professional, depending on the diagnosis?

**Mrs. Rodriguez-Cupid:** What I would say as well, in addition to the psychologists we have on board, we have also engaged external professionals for the outsourcing of any additional Psycho Eds that we need. We have recently gotten approval for the provision of outsourced services for psychoeducational assessments, and we are currently working on the speech and language and occupational type. So that, as we move forward, we have identified that these are critical needs. We have in the past met that need, but with budgetary restraints in the education system, that was terminated for a short time but we have recently gotten approval for the outsourcing of services, again, through the university clinic and some other professionals. So we will be addressing any shortfall. So we are hoping that that will address the shortfall in what our division has the capacity to do and the speed at which it is being done.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. When I hear budgetary restraints and I know the Ministry has received, in some instances, in excess of \$11 billion, in this instance, \$7.9 billion, the red flag goes up automatically in terms of the allocation of that and the importance being placed on special needs and special needs organizations and children with special needs in Trinidad and Tobago, for the mere fact that, at the end of the day, something has to be done more definitively where support is being



provided. I know Ms. Ghany is standing by and then member Monroe, and member Nakhid you can go ahead with your questions. So, Ms. Ghany, go ahead please.

**Ms. Ghany:** Thanks Paul. Well, of course, I have been listening to all of the comments and, you know, mine is more of a statement that I feel that the existing system really is failing our children with special needs. You know, the system itself needs to be totally redesigned because I think we all have to be on the same page with regard to the understanding of inclusion and also the understanding of the universal design for education. This means that special schools as well have a place but there also needs to be more integration of children who have intellectual disabilities and disabilities like being hearing impaired and sight impaired that have nothing to do with the functioning of their intellectual capacity to learn.

They, in my opinion, and in the opinion of many of the international organizations, have total ability to be mainstream once they have the support through devices, through proper teaching methods and access, physical access to the schools and facilities in a normal learning environment. When I say that, I mean not in the COVID scenario where we are faced with the challenge of having to do a blended-type learning system. But if we are looking towards reintegration post-COVID and in the new dispensation, then those are some of the things that we need to really address.

I know that in the recent UNESCO GEM Report, and I will just want to—please indulge me to just read a couple of the statements that they had, you know, that the challenges:

“...include differing understandings of the word inclusion, lack of teacher support”—for an inclusive scenario—“absence of data on those excluded from education”—which we have heard here that we do not know the numbers that we are dealing with—“inappropriate infrastructure, persistence of parallel systems and special schools, lack of political will and community support...”

So it also involves changing perceptions of what children can achieve because in many instances we think that the children cannot achieve, which we have seen as a myth. Because when they are provided with the correct environment, they can achieve and they do achieve, and we see that in some of the self-advocates with Down Syndrome who are now working in jobs, you know, and these are not token jobs, these are jobs that they have been given based on their ability to perform in the workplace.

So we really need to get to, you know, the point where we do a complete assessment of the system with a view to changing it, so that it can cater and look at some of these best practices that we have around us. We do not need to recreate the wheel. And I know the Ministry was looking at a pilot

project which never got off the ground for whatever reason, and I hope that, you know, these discussions will help us to really move towards that.

**11.40 a.m.**

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you, Ms. Ghany. And, you know, there is little or no debate on that. Inclusive education is clearly defined as education where persons with special needs are accommodated, as far as possible, in a general education classroom setting unless it is an extreme situation where special accommodation is needed. So schools for the deaf and schools for the blind, in most jurisdictions, are anathema to special—to inclusive education because students with hearing impairments or vision impairments can be accommodated in the general Ed classroom in most cases. And in the extreme case, then there will be even special teacher support or special support. So there is a general Ed teacher and a teacher assistant, and a special Ed teacher in the classroom to remediate students with special needs.

And one of the reasons that that is so important is that students with needs have to eventually live in the real world. So it has been proven by tons of research that the combining of students in a general Ed classroom in an inclusive setting is better for the typical learner and also the learner with special needs. So we really have to move more in the direction of what is the international global best practice for inclusive education and stop having all these fragmented approaches because it just convolutes the situation in my opinion. Member Monroe and then member Nakhid. Go ahead. Apologies for ranting.

**Mr. Monroe:** Thank you, Chairman. Good day to all members, once again, and Trinidad and Tobago. Today my questions would be directed to the Association of Administrators of Public Special Schools. Your submission highlighted that while special schools have received assistance with devices, in some cases, the appropriate assistive technology for the special needs students such as screen readers for the visually impaired—and my first question—it is a two-part question: What is the estimated cost to equip these devices with the appropriate assistive technology? And two, has the Ministry of Education assisted in equipping these devices with the assistive technology?

**Mr. Chairman:** Ms. Griffith, go ahead, please, or Dr.—

**Ms. Griffith:** I think that is for Mr. Mundy, I believe.

**Mr. Chairman:** Oh, it is for Mr. Mundy. Go ahead, Mr. Mundy.

**Mr. Mundy:** Yes. The average price for a screen reader is around \$6,000. Now, if you are purchasing that screen reader with a site licence, it will cost much less per unit. Right? Other screen readers—you

also have your screen magnification software and also you have other technology, like your refreshable Braille display, which instead of a student wanting to use or a person wanting to use a screen reading software, they can read the Braille of a refreshable Braille display to use a computer.

The software that we requested was not provided. You had another software that was used on the computer that is not as effective and does not work efficiently enough for the students to really perform well using the computer. Okay?

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you, Mr. Mundy. And you can also supply more information in writing. Member Nakhid, go ahead, please. I think you need to unmute, member Nakhid.

**Mr. Nakhid:** Is that better?

**Mr. Chairman:** Yes, that is fine. Thank you.

**Mr. Nakhid:** Yes. Before I get into the substantive questioning, I heard from someone from the Ministry of Education concerning the clinical psychologists that have been sourced and employed. About how many of those psychologists are actually child psychologists, since we are dealing with child education mostly?—children education. How many of those psychologists are actually child psychologists?

**Mr. Chairman:** Mrs. Rodriguez-Cupid?

**Mrs. Rodriguez-Cupid:** Yes. Our psychologists—the psychologists who are employed by the Ministry of Education, they are clinical psychologists who are trained in the assessment of learners from early childhood through—to adults. They would have practised in that area. So our psychologists are trained. We have psychologists school as well as clinical psychologists. So they are in that. A child psychologist may specialize in a different—they have a speciality for developmental purposes, et cetera, but they are well-equipped for the purposes that they are employed for within the Ministry to assess the learning needs of students.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. Member Nakhid, go ahead, please.

**Mr. Nakhid:** Okay. First to Mr. Suratt of the Blind Welfare Association. You indicated in your submission that students who require physical contact with learning material should be allowed to attend school for this purpose—obviously face-to-face learning. What has the Blind Welfare Association done in their approach to the Ministry of Education and/or the Ministry of Health with proposals or recommendations to facilitate visually-impaired students in the face-to-face learning environment?

**Mr. Suratt:** Mr. Chairman?

**Mr. Chairman:** Go ahead, please, Mr. Suratt.

**Mr. Suratt:** We have been working together with the Ministry of Education and we did have a couple online training to train teachers on how to assist children who are blind using the hybrid system. With the Ministry of Health, we did not reach out to the Ministry of Health, so that could be a consideration but it was just through the Ministry of Education.

I do not know if I can also use the opportunity to raise the issue that the Blind Welfare has a slight disagreement, respectfully to Mr. Mundy's suggestion about the screening software. We use NVDA, Non-Visual Desktop Access and we also train students how to use it, and it is very good and it is free. We also work with Nalis and we also encourage Nalis to use that free open software. So it is working well and our computer instructor is also teaching them.

Follow-up also, we—there are a lot of Ministries who offer help to the disabled—like our line Ministry has the Disabilities Affairs Unit. What we would like to suggest is that a coordinated effort could take place with our line Ministry, Ministry of Education, all the other Ministries, like Ministry of Sport, Ministry of Social Development and Family Services; all the different Ministries that offer services to persons who are blind.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. Let us go to Ms. Bastien. I saw your hand up.

**Ms. Bastien:** Thank you, Chair. I wanted to firstly agree with Ms. Ghany—[*Technical difficulties*] Just now, one minute, with the feedback. I wanted to agree with Ms. Ghany with regard to the importance of inclusive practice and share that, though slowly, we are in the process of implementing some movement towards inclusive practice within the Ministry of Education via the inclusive schools' project. And a large part of the implementation of that project has been focusing on doing training with teaching staff as well as principals. We have conducted quite a number of training on the whole issue of social justice and dispositional factors in working with students with special needs, very much emphasizing the same point that Ms. Ghany was making that many of these students can learn within the mainstream sector—education sector.

So via the inclusive schools' project—I think Ms. Ghany said it has not started. We have started. We started in November of 2019, and of course, COVID came so we had some challenges with moving forward with implementation via students. But we have been doing quite a bit of training, not only with teachers and principals who actually teach students with disabilities, but teachers within the

mainstream. Because we believe that students with disabilities can be integrated further and really move the system towards an inclusive one. So we are doing the work there.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. One of the challenges here, before I go to the— [*Interruption*] Thank you. The Division of Education, please standby—is that trying to remedy suboptimal performance for children with special needs while trying to transition in a pandemic situation is part of what the challenge is here. Because it is almost impossible to do that if the system was not working effectively in the first place. So you have different layers of challenges now and it is almost impossible to get the kind of optimal outputs you want, because you are coming from behind.

I apologize. Let us go to the Division of Education who have been standing by for a while to give us a sense of what they have heard so far and what they feel the Tobago situation can provide, in terms of solutions that have worked or the challenges that you may have.

**Mrs. Rollocks-Hackett:** Thank you, Sen. Richards, Chair. First of all, I want to respond to some of the questions that were asked, prior to the Ministry of Education—

**Mr. Chairman:** Please do.

**Mrs. Rollocks-Hackett:**—and provide the context as far as Tobago is concerned. As far as the allocations are concerned, we have two special education schools in Tobago. They are the School for the Deaf Speech and Language Impaired and we have Happy Haven. For the School for the Deaf, the allocation is approximately one—

**Mr. Chairman:** Go ahead, we are hearing you.

**Mrs. Rollocks-Hackett:** You are hearing me?

**Mr. Chairman:** Yes, loud and clear.

**Mrs. Rollocks-Hackett:** Okay. Right. The allocation for the school for the deaf is approximately \$1.5 million and for Happy Haven, it is \$2.2 million, and that covers salaries, training, resources, travelling, et cetera, et cetera.

**Mr. Chairman:** How many students are remediated at those institutions?

**Mrs. Rollocks-Hackett:** So total—in total, we have 113 students in both schools and those students we have at the schools—the necessary personnel to ensure that these students are provided with the kind of education that they require at this point in time. As far the training is—

**Mr. Chairman:** Just before you go on—sorry, to interrupt you.

**Mrs. Rollocks-Hackett:** Yes.

**Mr. Chairman:** So there are no—in Tobago, the policy is not to integrate students with special needs into the general education classroom. You have the specialist schools specifically for those students with those challenges.

**Mrs. Rollocks-Hackett:** We have some element of integration that takes place, as far as students at some of our primary schools, our mainstream primary schools and also at the secondary level, but in very, very small numbers.

**Mr. Chairman:** And is there specific support provided for those students in the mainstream classroom?

**Mrs. Rollocks-Hackett:** Well, to a minimal level, at this point in time, we are in the process of engaging teacher aides for those students. And at the level of the student support, we have officers there who interact with those students to ensure that their needs are taken care of. But ideally, we should really have teacher aides at the various schools. But at the Student Support Services unit, we have our guidance officers and we have Special Ed teachers who do interact with those students.

**Mr. Chairman:** And of the 113 or students that you have identified at the two institutions, what has been the experience in transitioning to a virtual environment during the pandemic? Have you been able to provide the support for them? And what does that support look like?

**Mrs. Rollocks-Hackett:** I want to indicate that the experience has been very similar to what has been indicated, as far as nationally. You find that many of the students and their parents—lack of devices, issues with connectivity, et cetera. And because of the types of learners that these children are, you recognize that even after we have received devices—because we got devices donated by Digicel ensuring that, at this point in time, that all the 113 students they have access to devices, but the problems lies with the ability to utilize the devices for learning.

And as a result of that, together with the principals at the various schools and support services coming from the students support unit, we have been training parents to enable the parents to assist the students in utilizing the devices. Because some of the students have difficulty even using the—well, most of the devices are tablets—even interacting with the tablets that they have received at this point in time. So we have that.

And also, it was mentioned, the Ministry of Education has been rolling out training that also targets teachers at the special schools. Our teachers in Tobago are also participating in those training sessions.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. Now—

**Mrs. Rollocks-Hackett:** I also want to indicate to you as far as our Student Support Services, we have recently employed 19 new officers, 13 guidance officers, five social workers and one school psychologist. So our unit is now 45—42 persons who are there to assist our students. We are also part of the national inclusive school project. So we have three pilot schools in Tobago. So we are working along ensuring that that goal—ultimate goal of inclusiveness, that we actually have that on the ground.

**Mr. Chairman:** That gives me some sort of warm feeling in my heart. Before you go—and this question is also secondly to the Ministry of Education, and then I will have member Nakhid complete his questioning and go to member Beckles who, I hope, is standing by. What sort of differentiated or differentiation of curriculum have you been able to activate? Because it is one thing getting devices and connectivity. The curriculum cannot be same when it is being delivered virtually—or assessments. And that question is for you—for students with special needs that is—and also for the Education Ministry Student Support Services. So we will start with you on that response, in terms of the differentiation of the curriculum for virtual learning and assessment modalities?

**Mrs. Rollocks-Hackett:** Okay. As far as the online assessment is concerned, what has been happening is, yes, the curriculum is not the same because the assessment—at the end of the day, we encourage more authentic and performance-based assessments. So as far as the students at the special schools are concerned, we have had teachers encouraging or giving assessment that required the taping—videotaping of what the students have been doing for the benefit of the teachers. And that is usually monitored or they are supervised by their parents in ensuring that these videos are taped and they will assess them based on that. Some of them are involved in e-journals, again, under the supervision of their parents, given their unique disabilities or special needs.

In addition to that—[*Inaudible*] the performance base, and that is largely the way in which we have been assessing our special needs students at this point in time. To some extent, worksheets are utilized that are made available to the parents and the parents will work again with the students, given their capabilities, and those sheets are then forwarded to the teachers at the various schools.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. Education Ministry, the same question to you, please.

**Mrs. Rodriguez-Cupid:** Yes. Thank you, Chair, I would want to endorse some of the same responses that my colleague just shared. We have differentiated—we have attempted that in the onset of COVID, we realize that our focus in the initial months would have been to assist our students, especially the most vulnerable students, to make that transition to home-based learning and to the

virtual learning environment.

We assisted parents, for example, with strategies for working with the students at home and an increased focus on life skills, communication and social skills, and a lot of these were done through communication with parents. Now, we have to recognize that, like everyone else, many of our parents were not accessible, many of our students were not accessible initially and therefore, a variety of modalities were utilized, including the use of WhatsApp, including the use of the various platforms, but mainly our students were responding more to the development of packages, the preparation of targeted-packages that would have identified their learning goals as per their individual education plans.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. Can I go to Ms. Veronica John and then Ms. Francesca Monsegue first—next, sorry. Ms. John, go ahead, please. Your response to what you have been hearing.

**Ms. John:** Okay. The testing of the students is a bit of a challenge but, in most instances, the teachers are using a lot of project work, so that they present a finished piece and they show the process by which they complete the piece. They do have monthly tests and end-of-term test, to some extent. However, parents sometime complain that to print the worksheets, it is a problem because of lack of resources. So if that is the case then the school will print it for them and they have to come to the school, collect those test papers in a sealed package, they will open it in front of teachers the morning of the exam, and they have to leave their cameras on so that the teachers can monitor. But we still have issues with some parents finding ways to assist the children, and we can tell, because when everything is perfectly correct, and we know what the children were doing before, we know that they got some assistance with that. And if you ask them the following day, “How did you do this?” They cannot answer. So there are challenges with testing the students.

**Mr. Chairman:** Go ahead, Ms. Monsegue. Sorry. Go ahead, please.

**Ms. Monsegue:** Okay. Thank you. Well, like Ms. John, you know, you are never really sure if—how well the children are understanding the content, you know, because we have had cases too where work is coming back correct but you know that that child would have missed a whole lot of the content itself, you know. So that is the challenge, you cannot really say, “Well, yes they are understanding, they are not understanding”, but we try. All right?

So at the end of every month, we have designated our dates to do our little summative assessments. All right? So that, at the end of the term, we could— we do an end-of-term test per se, summative



assessments that would add up. All right?

We also have a lot of project-based assessments as well too. What we have that is really working for us as a staff is that biweekly, we have a sort of “each one, teach one” sessions, whereby teachers—and I am happy to say that the teachers who have just come out from UTI are the ones who are leading the way in terms of the technology—teachers teaching teacher during those sessions, so we learn from each other. We see what this one has tried, probably we could try that, you know, because we realize that we are our own resource personnel too, so to speak, you know.

Even though I work closely with the school’s social worker—and my communication with her at this time was basically with parents who would have been going through socioeconomic challenges and, you know, trying to reach them that kind of thing. But we realized too that even these personnel knowing sign language and knowing how to communicate with our students is challenging for them. So we end up doing it sometimes, you know, even though we are working with them, that kind of thing.

So, yeah, as I said, we are doing our little summative assessments and at the end of term, we communicate with the parents. I must say too that, a lot of the communication with the parents, what teachers would find themselves doing is teaching parents the vocabulary before they actually get onto lessons. Right? Because communication parent to child is a challenge. So teachers have been doing that in that best possible way and they also have regular meetings with their parents. Okay? As the administrator, I have not done a general parents meeting. I meet parents according to the departments.

**Mr. Chairman:** Finished?

**Ms. Monsegue:** Yeah. I think so at this time.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you so much. Member Nakhid, did you finish your questioning? Member Nakhid?

**Mr. Nakhid:** Yes. Yes.

**Mr. Chairman:** Are you finished?

**Mr. Nakhid:** Can you hear me now?

**Mr. Chairman:** Yes, go ahead, please.

**Mr. Nakhid:** Yes. I had one more question for Mr. Suratt.

**Mr. Chairman:** Go ahead, please.

**Mr. Nakhid:** Okay. Mr. Suratt, just to paraphrase, you were not completely happy with the present

hybrid schooling, in regard to the ECCE and primary school children who are blind or visual impaired. So my question would be, other than the need for teaching aides, what are the specific needs of visual impaired ECCE and primary school children not being addressed by the online learning environment?

**Mr. Suratt:** Mr. Chair, can I continue?

**Mr. Chairman:** Yes, go ahead please.

**Mr. Suratt:** Okay. Our children are really tactile learners, so that the specific need would be hands on. So this is the reason why we had suggested hands-on teaching for our students. And pertaining to student aide—because most of our children are, based on what we have in the school system, they are just blind. So we are suggesting itinerant teachers who will come in to deal with the specific skillset that that child, who is blind, needs to learn, that they would not get from the regular school system, for example, orientation. What we mean by that, how children to navigate their surroundings, mobility, how to use cane technique, so that they could move from one place to the next, learning about quarter turn and half turn, learning to be aware of their surroundings, learning braille, learning tactile learning, 3D imaging, learning—so this is what we are suggesting for a child who is blind to develop or to learn; things that the regular school will not teach them pertaining to blindness specifically. So we need that kind of support to teach the child how to cope with their blindness. And also, we need to train the parents how to cope with their child who is also blind.

So the big question here is what we are asking, not only to the Ministry of Education but the general public, how do we lift the expectation for a child who is blind? We must believe that that child could succeed. We must believe that that child could live a comfortable life like anybody else in society. So the main takeaway here is, lifting the expectation of the child who is blind. Thank you very much.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. Member Beckles, thank you for being so patient. You can go ahead please, member Beckles. Member Beckles? If not, I will go to member Singh. Member Singh, go ahead please. Member Singh, are you there?

**12.10 p.m.**

**Mr. Singh:** Yes, sorry.

**Mr. Chairman:** Go ahead, please.

**Mr. Singh:** Yes, Chairman, I wanted to find out from the Down Syndrome Family Network, I have a few questions, I will just probably pose two of them now. In the submissions regarding the parents, I noticed a couple of the parents were not receiving aid from the Ministry, could the representative

from that network indicate, out of the 40 parents some of them did not receive any assistance, could you identify what type of assistance this entailed and how did you all go about dealing with that issue?

**Mr. Chairman:** Ms. Ghany, go ahead please. Ms. Ghany is Down Syndrome Family Network.

**Ms. Ghany:** Hi, the survey as you rightly said asked the parents to identify if they had a child already enrolled in education and if during, this is specific to the COVID-19 period, whether or not they had received any sort of support. Now, we have several of the children who actually are on a list with the Ministry awaiting, number one, the assessment, because even though you are born with Down Syndrome, apparently you still have to be assessed, and also waiting for teachers' aides.

We are trying to have our kids in the network mainstreamed, so we push for them to be included, not to attend a special school. Many of them still have problems being accepted into the typical schools. It may vary from location to location based on the principal at the school not wanting to accept the child. In these cases, we tell the parents that they should go to the Ministry and report that they have been turned away, or just turn up every day to the school and, you know, push as hard as they can to have the child accepted. So, the other thing is that we also feel very strongly that we need new legislation passed by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago to clearly define the situation with regard to children with disabilities and their access to typical education. Because it does state that all children are entitled to an education, but the legal jargon apparently has some sort of gaps with regard to children with disabilities and how they should be accepted into schools. So, I do not know if that answers the question completely, and I think you said you had two questions.

**Mr. Singh:** Yes.

**Mr. Chairman:** Yes, member Singh, go ahead please.

**Mr. Singh:** Before I go to the next question, Chairman, I mean, you would agree with me that we seriously need to do something about the situation, because in my estimation all children are supposed to be considered equal and the opportunities are really supposed to be across the board. So to hear some students are being left out or principals not accepting children, I mean, that is something very startling and very amazing to note in a country like ours where it should be equality and equity. So, my next question—

**Mr. Chairman:** Just a second. Ms. Ghany, the Education Act actually states that each child needs to get the education that fulfil its potential, and each child has different potential and different competencies, but the interpretation of that is where we have the issue.

**Ms. Ghany:** Correct.

**Mr. Singh:** My follow up question. In your contribution earlier I noted you said that there are a lot of parents that are not too tech savvy with computers and the technology being used, and I could tell you a lot of parents, you know, more traditionally who have not been acquainted with technology now, are seeing hell to cope with the environment. So, as a network, what have you all done or lobbied for these parents who, you know, are really struggling to meet the requirements of giving their child the opportunity to study and to be treated equally and be given that opportunity of education. How has the network been able to effectively reach out to these parents who have not been able to utilize the technology and so on? How have you been able to impact that?

**Ms. Ghany:** Well, the network over the last year has been—well, we have several mediums, we use, we have a parents’ chat group which has about 200 parents on it and we, almost on a daily basis, we share information with the parents regarding educational matters. So, we share from the National Down Syndrome Congress in the United States all of the up to date teaching tools. We have shared, you know, access to the reading material that has been done, flash cards, new teaching techniques for children with Down Syndrome during COVID and that material has been shared with them from the time we went into lockdown.

We also have quarterly family workshops so we continue to do the quarterly family workshops online where, again, we engage with several professionals who again, learning—psychologists. There were psychologists, there were teachers and there were parents who also contributed to the sessions where teachings tools again were shared with the parents. These were down via PowerPoint presentations and other slides and so on. So they have been getting this information on an ongoing basis.

Next, on Friday this week we will be having our World Down Syndrome Day Conference and, again, we have about six presenters, international presenters. We actually have a doctor, Dr. Baloney from Maryland who would be presenting on COVID-19 and medical interventions and things of concern for persons with Down Syndrome during COVID-19 as well. I am talking about the vaccine and how it can impact or why it is okay for persons with Down Syndrome to take the vaccine. So we try to keep very abreast of things. Of course there are instances where we will have to speak with parents on a one on one to give them individual support in where they have specific interventions that are necessary, and we also do that through the one on one counselling with them. And, a lot of what the network does as well is referring parents to the organizations or the therapist or persons who can help

them to get proper assistance for the kids. This included providing laptops to some kids who were financially challenged, which we did through our corporate partners, and also in some cases like recently we had a child five years old who got a stroke and had to have interventions with regard to wheelchair, medicine and other things. So it goes beyond education, what the work of the network. But these are interventions that are different depending on the child and the need of the child. But our work has definitely increased because of the need for more support.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. Member Singh, any more questions?

**Mr. Singh:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman, I am okay.

**Mr. Chairman:** Okay, thanks. I want to go next to Dr. Shara Zoe —and Ms. Griffith of the Private Special Schools Association, and ask how many schools are in the association and how many learners with special needs and/or families are in your membership please? *[Pause]* So Dr. Zoe—

**Dr. Zoe:** Sorry, I was giving Phillis a moment to respond as she is the president. But I am aware that there are—because I am just a member but she is the president. There are about 13 registered Private Special Schools with the association. The numbers vary. So, for example, the school I am the principal of, we have 24 students, because of the severity of our students' needs. So, our students are predominantly students with autism. We have one student with Down Syndrome and a couple other disabilities. But our students are moderate to severe on the spectrum, so we do not have what is considered the high-functioning students. So, our school is a small one, but there are other schools that are a part of the association with larger numbers, 200 and stuff like that. I cannot tell you what the total number is because like I said Phillis is the president, I am just a member, but that is our perspective in terms of our school, and the number of private special schools that are part of the association.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. Ms. Griffith, can you answer the question now?

**Ms. Griffith:** I am going to try my best and I hope that I do not get bumped off again. So, we do have 13 schools with our association.

**Mr. Chairman:** Go ahead. Could you repeat that please? We just lost you for a bit there?

**Dr. Zoe:** She said there are actually 13 schools.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thirteen schools, okay.

**Ms. Griffith:** Yes, and we also have three other schools who are still part *[Technical difficulties]* those schools that started with us. They have some challenges, one or two of them *[Technical difficulties]*

registered. We have two schools who would have been registered with a grant funding, but because one school had to move from their location and go to another location, they had to go through the whole new registration which up to now they have not been able to complete.

**Mr. Chairman:** Your signal is falling out and coming in.

**Ms. Griffith:** Then we have another school had some other challenges. I believe it is—are you all hearing me?

**Mr. Chairman:** You dropping off and coming in. I am going to ask a general question for the organizations. Two questions that we received from the public: One, do your organizations also receive subventions from the Ministry of Social Development or other government agencies, and what percentage of these funds is actually spent on the students versus the percentage in operational cost and staff? And also does the educational Ministry have any mechanism in place to rack the effectiveness of subventions/disbursements to you, provided by these agencies, and determine if the funds are actually helping students? So, the first question, of course, is for the agencies. Let me start with Dr. Mahase on that. Do you also receive subventions from the Ministry of Social Development or other government agencies?

**Dr. Mahase:** No, we do not receive any subvention from any government agencies.

**Mr. Chairman:** All right, Ms. Griffith.

**Ms. Griffith:** Yes, we do get partial funding for 10 months of the year from the Ministry of Education.

**Mr. Chairman:** Ms. Ghany. Ms. Ghany, do you receive subventions? All right, let us go to Mr. Suratt.

**Mr. Suratt:** Yes, the Blind Welfare Association, not specifically for a school purpose, but yes we receive a subvention and we are governed by an Act of Parliament, an Ordinance, and our funding comes directly from the draft estimate, budget, and it passes through our line Ministry. So, not necessarily we get funding from our line Ministry, but our funding is reflected in the draft estimate. We are similar to Princes Elizabeth and also Hearing Impaired, and these are the only three organizations that get that type of direct funding.

**Mr. Chairman:** All right, Ms. Monsegue has not rejoined us, and Ms. John and then Mr. Frederick.

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Chairman, regarding— [*Inaudible*] —at some point in time I would like to ask one or two questions please.

**Mr. Chairman:** Absolutely. Welcome member Indarsingh, we are glad you could join us. Ms. John.

**Ms. John:** Okay. Funding would go to the Trinidad and Tobago Association for the Hearing

Impaired, subventions would go there. What the school will get is funding that—it is a very small amount. It is just over \$2,000 per year, about \$2,200 per year, but subventions would go to TTAHI.

**Mr. Chairman:** I am kind of stumped that is why I got thrown off there. Two thousand you said?

**Ms. John:** Yes, 2,200 was the last.

**Mr. Chairman:** Twenty-two hundred per year?

**Ms. John:** Yes.

**Mr. Chairman:** Okay, thank you. Mr. Frederick.

**Mr. Frederick:** Yes, first it must be clearly that there is a separation between the Princess Elizabeth Centre and the Princess Elizabeth Society, it is separate from the Princess Elizabeth School. However, whatever funding that they receive we are not aware of, or our entire funding comes from the Ministry of Education. What I want to raise, seeing that we were looking at enrolment, put Princess Elizabeth at a disadvantage, because we are a primary school or rated as a primary school Tech Voc and CVQ subjects are not allowed for our students because we do not have the teachers. Primary school teachers cannot deliver those type of content, things like beauty culture, commercial food prep, these things that could afford them employment when they leave us at 17 and 18. Also, we are having problems getting school supervision to allow us to register students for SEA. SEA is a gateway to further education. I have had numerous discussions this year alone that they believe that even though it is the child's right, the child may be frustrated even with the provisions of extra time, individual room and assistance in the room with writers and readers that it may be too much for the child.

**Mr. Chairman:** What you are saying is that you are having challenges registering your students for SEA. My understanding is that you are supposed to do that, I think it is the year before the child is supposed to write SEA, and the Ministry is supposed to write you back to ask what accommodations you may need. Is that what you understand the process to be?

**Mr. Frederick:** Registration was September, which is September to November of this year. When I approached it, when I assumed duty in September, supervision reached out to me and told me, why are we frustrating the children, even though it is their rights, why are we frustrating them to write the exam? School supervision who has no idea—

**Mr. Chairman:** Who is asking you that specifically?

**Mr. Frederick:** My direct school supervisor. That is why we keep—

**Mr. Chairman:** From Ministry of Education?

**Mr. Frederick:** Yes, and that is what we are saying. We have school supervision who is not trained to deal with special schools. They do not have an idea—

**Mr. Chairman:** Was that an official response from the Ministry of Education or somebody giving their personal opinion?

**Mr. Frederick:** Yes, Sir. That was the instructions from my line supervisor. I have been having issues with supervision where there is—the statutory duties of a principal would have acted or otherwise that is in the Education Act, they are the duties of the supervision or the supervisor. Supervisors have taken time to override the Minister's instructions in the guidelines in how we interact with staff, how we are able to control discipline in the schools.

**Mr. Chairman:** Mr. Frederick, how many students are you talking about here?

**Mr. Frederick:** To write the exams, three students.

**Mr. Chairman:** And this is on one occasion or is this on more than one occasion?

**Mr. Frederick:** Sir, we have not had consistent Standard 5 writing the exam since I have been at the school. We probably beg to get three about two years ago to write. We have children with the capabilities.

**Mr. Chairman:** What do you mean beg, are you documenting these requests for students to write SEA examination?

**Mr. Frederick:** I only took over in September, but since I have been here we have had to push the parent, because another thing is, parents are afraid of children going to secondary schools they will be bullied, so therefore—

**Mr. Chairman:** What kind of accommodation were you requesting for the students?

**Mr. Frederick:** We were not asking for accommodations, we just wanted the children to write. Yes, they have a physical disability but it might be wheelchair bound, it may be just a little extra time they may need in the exam. The children have the mental capacity to write the exam.

**Mr. Chairman:** And have you had a documented response from the Ministry, and I hope the Education Ministry officials are listening, because this is shocking—

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Mr. Chairman.

**Mr. Chairman:** Yes, member Indarsingh.

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Based on what Mr. Frederick has said, it is shocking, it is alarming, but could I ask, has Mr. Frederick written to the director of what we would call, or the CEO of the Ministry of



Education and by extension—

**Mr. Chairman:** The Chief Education Officer.

**Mr. Indarsingh:**—and the Permanent Secretary and so on, based on what he is telling this Committee about the behaviour of this school supervisor?

**Mr. Chairman:** Mr. Frederick?

**Mr. Frederick:** Yes, I have.

**Mr. Indarsingh:** You have?

**Mr. Chairman:** And the response?

**Mr. Frederick:** No, Sir. Furthermore, when we had discussions with the parents when it was originally suggested that the students do not write, the parents opted to withdraw the children from the exams.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. Member Indarsingh go ahead, please.

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Yes, Chairman. In addition to that, due to previous commitments which I indicated to the Secretariat I joined a bit late, but more importantly I heard in terms of one or two organizations said that they do not receive any funding. Have they applied to, let us say the Ministry of Social Development, and have they been communicated with why they have not been able to qualify or not enjoy governmental support, one? Two—

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. Member Indarsingh, just put a pause there. I think it is only fair that I give the Education Ministry a chance to respond to the information divulged by Mr. Frederick, and what the standard procedure should be, and what his sense of recourse should be.

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Okay.

**Mr. Chairman:** Madam PS.

**Ms. Baptiste-Simmons:** Chair, good afternoon. I would like Ms. Cupid to intervene and then I will respond with respect to some of the matters, because it is—I know Mr. Frederick indicated he wrote. I have not received any correspondence in this matter at all, so I will ask Ms. Mary Bastien or Ms. Cupid to respond with respect to registration for students or SEA.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. Ms. Bastien, go ahead, please.

**Ms. Bastien:** Yes. What Mr. Frederick has—well, I was not aware of that at Princess Elizabeth, however in the past we have all—[*Technical difficulties*]

**Mr. Chairman:** I think we have a bandwidth problem with Ms. Bastien, could the Permanent

Secretary take over please and respond to the other parts of question? Madam PS, because we are not hearing Ms. Bastien clearly.

**Ms. Baptiste-Simmons:** Yes. As Ms. Cupid is saying, that this one is really—I have never heard of this incident. I know that students are given the opportunity to write. In 2020 we would have honoured students. We had students who would have written the exams and we would have also for the first time, honoured students with awards who would have been special needs students. I am really stumped—

**Mr. Chairman:** Proceed, because I saw that I was—

**Ms. Baptiste-Simmons:** I am stumped. I am just stumped because—

**Mr. Chairman:** And I am also stumped but I do not—

**Ms. Baptiste-Simmons:** Yes, I am really stumped by the fact that—

**Mr. Chairman:** I would also tell you that while I applaud the awards I heard this year, it is not the first time I have heard that students have been denied access to the SEA examination and/or accommodation, so maybe there needs to be some sort of investigation into this practice which may be not Ministry's policy but someone making a decision that is beyond their remit.

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Chairman, we do not need to be stumped, we need to launch an investigation and—

**Mr. Chairman:** Member Indarsingh, I just asked the Ministry official to do just that.

**Mr. Indarsingh:** And could I based on where we are now, could I continue with my—

**Mr. Chairman:** Yes. Yes, please do.

**Ms. Baptiste-Simmons:** Before, before—excuse me, Chair.

**Mr. Chairman:** Yes, Ma'am.

**Ms. Baptiste-Simmons:** It is just for information that I get the—you see; I need the correspondence. Apart from launching the investigation, the matter has to be brought before me, is that okay Mr. Frederick, can you forward the information to me or to the Student Support Services?

**Mr. Frederick:** Ma'am, I actually have put something in the registered mail, it should be arriving at your office before the end of the week.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. Member Indarsingh.

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Yes, Chairman. As I said, I did not get the correct, or cannot recall the institution at this moment, but I heard one particular, I think it is Dr. Mahase, indicated that her organization does not get any funding, and my question was, if there are any other organizations before the Committee

this morning who applied and did not qualify, and were they communicated with in terms of why they did not qualify and how they could in future achieve the benchmark or the criteria to access Government funding? All from a special need point of view. Also could I ask the CEO of the Visually Impaired Association, if the Association realizes timely releases from the Ministry of Social Development and if the workers of the Visually Impaired Association are up-to-date in terms of their current collective bargaining period, or are there outstanding collective bargaining periods to be negotiated?

**Mr. Chairman:** So, let us go to Mr. Suratt, I think it is.

**Mr. Suratt:** Mr. Chair, collective agreement, yes that is outstanding. Two periods, that is six years that is outstanding. And based on releases, yes we are very appreciative, from all governments we always get, you could say most of the time. Over 90 per cent of the time we get releases on time. So, those are the two questions I think he asked.

**Mr. Indarsingh:** And Mr. CEO could I, through you, Chair, is the line Minister of the Visually Impaired Association fully aware that the collective bargain periods are outstanding for two periods?

**Mr. Suratt:** Yes, and also we have been in communication with the CPO's office and we are waiting for CPO's office to give an offer before.

**Mr. Chairman:** Mr. Suratt, thank you for that response. Member Indarsingh that is beyond the remit of this Committee. There was a question posed to Dr. Mahase from member Indarsingh.

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Yes.

**Dr. Mahase:** Thank you very much, Chair. Support Autism T&T is a voluntary organization, and we have been successfully organizing events and activities for the past six years because of the contribution of our volunteers. Specifically, we focus on youth voluntarism and we train our youths to engage in activities with persons with autism. On that basis we have not approached the Ministry, any of the Ministries or government bodies to fund any of our activities, but as we expand and we are in the process of opening a centre very soon, as we expand and we do that we will approach the Ministry for assistance. Thank you.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. Unfortunately, I know we have been going for a while. We have been told we have to wrap up, there is another JSC due to take the airwaves, so what I am going to do is go from—

**Mrs. Beckles-Robinson:** Chairman, can I ask one question quickly?

**Mr. Chairman:** Yes, go ahead please. Go ahead member.

**Mrs. Beckles-Robinson:** Just to follow up in terms of the autism, I just wanted to get a sense as to whether or not on a whole we should do a little more education in terms of autistic children, if there is any comments that, just as a follow up to what was just said. That is my input.

**Mr. Chairman:** Dr. Mahase.

**Dr. Mahase:** Can you clarify, education in terms of the general population or in terms—

**Mrs. Beckles-Robinson:** I am talking about education to the population, not education to the children, yes.

**Dr. Mahase:** So, Support Autism T&T have been actively involved in advocating for an inclusive society, and we have been all over in the public educating people about autism, as well as Autistic Society of Trinidad and Tobago has been doing that for many, many years. So for us it is a little more than just education now. For us it is more getting access to the opportunities for the children more than anything else.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you.

**Mrs. Beckles-Robinson:** I want to congratulate you for all the work. So, I am not saying that the education has not been taking place, and I know you all have been doing excellent work, but my thing is that overall I just think that the society in terms of what you are requesting, in terms of the integration and so, that I do not think that the impression is given that people are sufficiently conscious of some of the challenges. That is all. Thank you very much.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you, member Beckles. And while I note that the organization does a lot of digital work, it is always more important for public awareness. We are out of time badly, so I am going to just ask each of the stakeholder groups to give a one-minute wrap up, starting with the Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Education.

**Ms. Baptiste-Simmons:** Good afternoon, Chair, the Ministry of Education and its Student Support Services Division thank you for this opportunity to share our efforts in providing education without traditional face-to-face instruction. As other participants, we strive to balance our roles as advocates for equitable and adequate education for all, including our most margin lines and those with special education needs. Thank you.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you so much, and thank you for your grace under fire. To Mrs. Sherry Ann Rollocks-Hackett of the Tobago House of Assembly, the Division of Education, Innovation and

Energy.

**12.40 p.m.**

**Mrs. Rollocks-Hackett:** Thank you, Chair, and I want to end by saying that we are very thankful here at the Division of Education, Innovation and Energy for this opportunity to be a part of this process to contextualize as far as Tobago's perspective on this matter of special educational needs in Trinidad and Tobago. I just want to say, I wanted to make a statement as far as the registration of students, special needs students for the SEA examination. I too am a bit stunned of what I heard but I want to say in Tobago here we accommodate our students. Usually they come from the School for the Deaf Speech and Language Impaired and we usually facilitate them, they are facilitated and we have students currently at our secondary schools who would have done the SEA and would have succeeded and are at our schools. So just want to allay the fears of the Tobagonians who are listening, our students, we encourage it and they are also part of our system. So thanks very much for the opportunity to make our contribution today.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thanks for your contribution and presence. Ms. Griffith of the Private Special Schools Association.

**Ms. Griffith:** Hello, are you all hearing me any better now?

**Mr. Chairman:** Yes, we are.

**Members:** Yes.

**Ms. Griffith:** Okay, so I am using my phone. I would just like to say thank you so much, again, for this opportunity. We really do appreciate it. There was one thing I just wanted to add and it would have gone to the Ministry of Education for private special schools. The registered private special schools who received the partial funding, we are operating on an expired MOU. So maybe we could have another conversation about that. But thank you so much for this opportunity and we look forward to more collaborations. Thank you.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you so much. So let us go to Dr. Mahase of Support Autism T&T.

**Dr. Mahase:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman. So regarding children with autism in the online learning environment I want to ask that the Ministry of Education make the following a priority:

1. Address the delaying hiring of teachers' aides.
2. Make therapy accessible within the school or educational district.
3. Make available a list of the pilot schools where the inclusive education policy is supposedly

implemented so that stakeholders will be aware of these.

And I know this is a bit outside the purview of this Committee but I would like that the Ministry of Education address the fact that the majority of children with autism are not enrolled in an educational institution and have not been receiving an education so far for many years now.

And in conclusion I want to say that the issues raised here today are issues that have been raised by the special needs communities for many years now and it is becoming quite frustrating that special needs children continue to be denied equal access to an education here in Trinidad and Tobago. Thank you very much.

**Mr. Chairman:** And I endorse what you just said. Ms. Ghany.

**Ms. Ghany:** After Dr. Mahase, it sometimes leaves me a little speechless. Once again the Down Syndrome Family Network is nine years old this year. Nine years of advocating, lobbying and trying to educate and create awareness for persons with Down Syndrome. I think that it has—our partners have always been the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services and the Ministry of Gender and Child Affairs. I think that there is no excuse at this point in time that children with disabilities do not have access to equal opportunities for education. I think that it is great that we talk. I have been involved for nine years in talking but I would like really to see action now for these children before I die.

And really and truly, Senator, thank you so much for giving us this opportunity, but I look forward to us really moving to the next level and including our children in the general classroom and educating the public, because many of our parents themselves do not even understand the disability that their child has. And unless a parent understands, there will not be early intervention and early intervention is the key to ensuring that they can prepare themselves to go to school and to have an independent lifestyle. Thank you.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you so much. Mr. Suratt.

**Mr. Suratt:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, for this opportunity. The Blind Welfare Association would like to leave this meeting asking that teachers, specific teachers be identified, trained specifically how to teach the children who are blind, contract them or put them on the establishment for itinerant teachers so that they could go to the different schools and work with the students and the teachers, because not all children who are just blind need student aides, we need itinerant teachers. Learning material must be in a 2D, 3D imaging so our students, specifically in the primary schools, could learn

concepts and—so this is basically what we are—so thank you very much for this opportunity and all the best.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you so much. Mr. Mundy.

**Mr. Mundy:** Thank you. I wish to thank the Committee for allowing me the opportunity to voice our concerns as members of the public special schools. We are hoping that the relevant structure will be put in place, the type of training. We are not talking about workshops here; we are talking about postgraduate qualifications in the various disabilities in our public special schools. We are hoping that the scholarships that used to be provided to our staff be resumed and you will have many itinerant teachers coming out of that system. For instance, orientation and mobility, that is not just a nine-week course, that is basically a postgraduate level, Masters level. So we are talking about serious education here and we need to remember that the students that you find in the public special schools is basically from—

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you.

**Mr. Mundy:**—how to call it, from mild to profound and many of our schools that are in the public special schools do not and cannot even cater for some of the mild and some of the moderate, much more for the profound. So we need to put things into context, we have to look at the least restrictive environment here for our children with special education needs. Thank you.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you so much. Ms. John.

**Ms. John:** Okay, from the perspective of the school we too are happy for the opportunity to be part of this process. I hope that this is just the start in terms of productive talks to highlight some of the challenges that special schools and special needs students are faced with. So we look forward to further discussions where special needs students are the focus of attention. Thank you very much.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you so much. Mr. Frederick.

**Mr. Frederick:** Thank you, Chair, and to the Committee, thank you for allowing this presentation today. I also want to echo Mr. Mundy's sentiments that training should not just be about a workshop, but there is a need to partner with UTT and UWI for postgraduate training and qualifications. Thank you very much.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. Ms. Monsegue.

**Ms. Monsegue:** I too would advocate for a specialized training for teachers of the deaf and hard of hearing. It is not enough to just know sign language, there are specialized techniques involved in

teaching our children. It was indeed a privilege being a part of this session this morning and I look forward to continued dialogue with all stakeholders.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you so much and just to let all our stakeholders know, we thank you for your participation. And if there is additional information that you think that the Committee can find useful, please feel free to submit it to our Secretariat via the conduit through which you were contacted.

In closing, I just want to say, you know, we have heard about for decades, inclusive education policy, official policy in Trinidad and Tobago; it is a misnomer because it is not happening. I make no bones about saying that. It is way too slow in actually happening to the standard as it should and at this point given the information I know has been confirmed now, that Student Support Services is 20 per cent staffed, it is impossible for it to even begin to make the kind of in-roads that it should in terms of providing support for persons with disabilities, students and learners with disabilities. It is almost to the point of institutionalized marginalization now and it has to stop otherwise it makes no sense we in this country keep singing every creed and race finds an equal place, because every creed and race is not finding an equal place.

It was clear by the contributions here today that persons with disabilities and learners with disabilities are being marginalized in many, many different ways. And this is not laying blame at any particular government or political party. It is us as a country marginalizing this vulnerable group and not providing the kind of support on a consistent, sustainable, equitable basis to these persons who are equal citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

On behalf of the Secretariat who provided as usual, yeoman service, and all the Committee members, I am the Chairman, Paul Richards, thank you all for your participation and thanks to our viewers and listeners.

**Members:** Thank you. Thank you very much. Thank you for having us.

**Mr. Chairman:** This Committee is now adjourned.

**12.49 p.m.:** *Meeting adjourned.*



**VERBATIM NOTES OF THE fourth VIRTUAL MEETING OF THE SOCIAL SERVICES & PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION COMMITTEE HELD IN PUBLIC ON WEDNESDAY, APRIL 21, 2021, AT 10.17 A.M.**

**PRESENT**

Mr. Paul Richards	Chairman
Mr. Esmond Forde	Vice-Chairman
Ms. Penelope Beckles	Member
Mr. Avinash Singh	Member
Mr. David Nakhid	Member
Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh	Member
Mr. Rohan Sinanan	Member
Mr. Julien Ogilvie	Secretary
Mr. Johnson Greenidge	Assistant Secretary

**ABSENT**

Mr. Roger Monroe	Member [ <i>Excused</i> ]
Ms. Allyson West	Member

**MINISTRY OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION**

Mr. Claudelle McKellar	Acting Permanent Secretary
Mr. Charles Bobb-Semple	Head, National Information and Communication Technology Division (NICT)

**TELECOMMUNICATIONS AUTHORITY OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO**

Ms. Cynthia Reddock-Downes	Chief Executive Officer
Mr. Kirk Sookram	Deputy Chief Executive Officer

**TELECOMMUNICATION SERVICES OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO (TSTT & Bmobile)**

Ms. Lisa Agard	Chief Executive Officer Acting
Mr. Kenrick Garcia	Chief Technology Officer Acting

**DIGICEL TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO**

Mr. Abraham Smith	Chief Executive Officer
Ms. Chandrika Samaroo	Operations Director

**COLUMBUS COMMUNICATIONS TRINIDAD LIMITED (FLOW)**

Mr. Kurlleigh Prescod Country Manager

Ms. Cindy-Ann Gatt Commercial Director

**Mr. Chairman:** Good morning and welcome to the viewing and listening audience to this the fourth virtual hearing of the Joint Select Committee on Social Services and Public Administration. This is the Committee's fourth hearing with stakeholders pursuant to its enquiry into the effects of the hybrid and blended learning system on student performance in government and government-assisted schools during the COVID-19 restrictions.

Members of the public are invited to submit your comments or questions on the Parliament's social media platforms, YouTube channel *ParView*, or via Facebook and Twitter. We would like to thank you all for being with us this morning.

At this time, I would like to take time before we head into today's substantive business to acknowledge, as we have done yesterday in the Senate, the passing of former Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, Franklin Khan, and send condolences, and sympathy, and support, and prayers to his family at this time. He certainly was one of the significant contributors to the development of Trinidad and Tobago and we will certainly miss him.

At this time, I would like to introduce the representatives who are with us today who include the following: The Ministry of Public Administration and Digital Transformation, the Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago (TATT), the Telecommunication Services of Trinidad and Tobago (TSTT), Digicel Trinidad and Tobago, and Columbus Communications Trinidad Limited (FLOW). This enquiry's objectives include four main objectives. One, to assess the effectiveness of the hybrid blended learning system used by government and government-assisted schools in curriculum delivery; to compare and contrast student performance using traditional versus hybrid blended learning systems for similar time periods; to examine the systems and methods used to monitor and evaluate student performance in the hybrid blended learning system; and four, to assess the readiness of the hybrid blended learning system to adequately prepare students for external examinations and for their general development.

I am the committee's Chairman Paul Richards and at this time I would invite members of the Committee to please introduce themselves and we have expectation for all our members to be with us with the exception of member Monroe who has an emergency. Starting with member Forde.

*[Introductions made]*

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. Member Avinash Singh is with us, but he will be in and out. He is attending another conference concurrently, but we acknowledge his presence and he will join us in process again. Member Nakhid.

*[Introduction made]*

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you so much. And at this time I would like to invite members from the stakeholder groups with us today to introduce themselves and their teams, and also present to us a brief opening remark, generally it is usually two to three minutes, maximum. Starting with Mr. Claudelle McKellar, Acting Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Public Administration and Digital Transformation.

**Mr. McKellar:** Good morning, Chair and members. Thank you very much for having us here today. I will be joined by Mr. Charles Bobb-Semple who is our Head, National Information and Communication Technology Division here at the Ministry. Would you like me to give the opening remarks at this time, or after all the other persons have introduced themselves?

**Mr. Chairman:** Yes, please. Go ahead, thank you.

**Mr. McKellar:** Okay, sure. Chairman, and members of the Joint Select Committee on Social Services and Public Administration, thank you for inviting the Ministry of Public Administration and Digital Transformation to participate in the Committee's enquiry into the hybrid learning system on student performance in government and government-assists schools during the revised COVID-19 restrictions. We welcome the opportunity given that the Ministry's mandate includes digital transformation, bridging the digital divide, and improving access to and utilization of ICTs at the national level.

Mindful of the restrictions that have been put in place to protect our nation's people, and more so our students, the Ministry and its agencies have facilitated remote and blended learning through the following initiatives. One, the provision of additional spectrum to mobile providers; the roll-out of TTWiFi to additional locations across Trinidad and Tobago, and third, availability of ICT access centres in underserved communities.

Furthermore, Chair, please be informed that the Ministry, the Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago and another agency, iGovTT, have been working directly with the Ministry of Education to ensure that students are provided with ICT enabled devices, SIM cards, and TTWiFi

services at public schools that do not have Internet access, and those where the Internet access service is below the required standard. The Ministry is also engaging with the Ministry of Education on the development of that Ministry's learning management system.

Chair, in closing I wish to assure you that the Ministry's representatives undertake to support the Committee's enquiry by responding as best we can to your questions, and subsequently providing any additional information that may be required. We also welcome any recommendations that this Committee may proffer as a means of improving the Ministry's ability to deliver on its mandate, particularly as it relates to the subject of today's meeting. Thank you very much.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you very much, Acting PS McKellar. We appreciate your opening commentary from the Ministry of Public Administration and Digital Transformation. Next we go to the Chief Executive Officer of the Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago (TATT), Mrs. Cynthia Reddock-Downes.

**Mrs. Reddock-Downes:** Good morning, Mr. Chairman, and members of the Committee, I am Cynthia Reddock-Downes, Chief Executive Officer of the Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago. With me today is Mr. Kirk Sookram who is the Deputy Chief Executive Officer of the Authority.

The Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago commenced its operations of regulator of telecoms and broadcasting in July 2004, at a time when there was a virtual monopoly in telecommunication services and with a mandate bestowed upon it by the Telecommunications Act, Chap. 47:31. This mandate referred to the liberalization of the telecommunications and broadcasting sectors and included introducing fair competition, choice, new service offerings at affordable prices, and at the same time promoting and protecting the interest of the public by promoting access to telecommunication services, promoting universal service, protection of customers, and high standards of service provision.

Today, it is a great pleasure and privilege to be asked to account to you, members of the Joint Select Committee, on elements of our stewardship and in the presence of some of our concessionaires who have committed themselves to providing high quality services to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. It should be noted that now we have two mobile providers with over 1.98 million subscriptions as at December 2020. We have eight Internet service providers with over 320,000 subscriptions. We have 15 broadcasters via cable, five free to air television broadcasters, and 37 radio stations. I look forward

to our deliberations and as we seek to improve the lives of our people and particularly our children in using ICTs in Trinidad and Tobago. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you very much, Mrs. Reddock-Downes, CEO of TATT. We next move to the Chief Executive Officer Acting of TSTT, Ms. Lisa Agard. Ms. Agard.

**Ms. Agard:** Good morning Chairman, and other members of the Committee, and good morning to the viewing and listening public of Trinidad and Tobago. TSTT has been part of the fabric of Trinidad and Tobago's society for many years. And, we are particularly proud of the role that we have played in this competitive environment to be part of the process that saw, when competition was introduced, fixed broadband penetration in Trinidad and Tobago move from 34 per cent at the inception of competition to where it is today at 84 per cent of household penetration. That is in no small part due to the billions of dollars that TSTT, and I would say other concessionaires in the market, have invested in the development of ICT infrastructure in Trinidad and Tobago.

And not being so bold as to speak on behalf of my colleague, but I would say that as an industry we have invested significantly, we have supported the Government in its various initiatives during COVID-19 and otherwise, and we have played a significant role in advancing broadband infrastructure development both on the fixed side and on the wireless side such that today we can say with confidence as an industry we reach over 95 per cent of the population of Trinidad and Tobago with broadband capability whether it be fixed or wireless. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you, Ms. Agard, CEO of TSTT. Next we move to the CEO of Digicel TT, Mr. Abraham Smith. Mr. Smith, good morning.

**Mr. Smith:** Good morning. Good morning, Mr. Chairman, hon. members of the Committee. I am Abraham Smith, the CEO of Digicel Trinidad and Tobago, and I am joined with Chandrika Samaroo, our Chief Technical Officer. I thank you and the Committee for the invitation to appear today. These are important discussions as we talk about improving the hybrid learning system here in Trinidad and Tobago.

This month marks 15 years that Digicel has been part of the social fabric of Trinidad and Tobago. We have endeavoured to do our part to keep people connected, entertained, supported, and we take that responsibility seriously. In the past 15 years, together with our industry colleagues, we have helped to transform the telecommunications market by taking the best global ideas and applying them here. In 2016 we made a deliberated decision to invest significantly to bring additional broadband

infrastructure into the country. Since then, we have invested over one and a half billion dollars into the roll-out of our fibre and mobile broadband networks to provide the best connectivity and service possible.

Since that time, digitization, digital transformation, e-commerce, all of these buzz words have come into place and then COVID-19 hit, and these aspirations were not aspirations anymore but rather a forced reality. Within days of the events of last year we rolled out a comprehensive support campaign to our customers. To date we estimate that we have offered over \$170 million of relief here in Trinidad and Tobago during this COVID-19 pandemic.

It was recently expressed “no child left behind” means “no child left offline”, and we want to ensure that this becomes a reality through the length and breadth of these two islands. As an industry, as my colleague said, we have worked to provide fixed connectivity to over 84 per cent of households nationally and mobile coverage to over 98 per cent. However, online education requires us to think about not only connecting those remaining households but also devices, affordability, educational content and the delivery of that content to effectively impact students.

So the work of this Committee and us as an industry is significant and we look forward to today’s hearing and we hope this will open new doors and new possibilities for collaboration and partnership between Government and the other stakeholders here, and as we say at Digicel, we believe that this collaboration will make this better together. So thank you.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you very much, Mr. Smith, appreciate your contribution. And last but by no means least, the Country Manager for FLOW, Mr. Kurleigh Prescod. Mr. Prescod.

**Mr. Prescod:** Good morning everyone. Good morning members of the Committee, good morning to the other participants on this working session. I am joined this morning with our industrious Director of Commercial Operations, Cindy-Ann Gatt. So she is also on the call with us, and we are happy to make representation on behalf of Columbus Communications Trinidad Limited, a subsidiary of Cable & Wireless across the region as it pertains to how do we work together as an industry, government and industry players, to see how we can achieve every single child being able to access educational content despite the constraints that have been put on us in the pandemic.

As our colleagues would have gone over, you know, the accessibility of broadband infrastructure in Trinidad and Tobago is significant. I would also want to add to the point that not only is the coverage reach significant, but the quality of the network infrastructure is one of the best, if not among the top

two or three across the entire region. The type of speeds, the type of reliability, up time. It is really among the top tier across the region and very competitive to what consumers have access to in the sort of so-called more developed countries and nations. So we are proud to be a part of that drive to investment to bring the level of broadband infrastructure in Trinidad and Tobago to such a competitive level.

As it pertains to the specific pandemic, we have also been very proud of our efforts in this regard, and some of those efforts even preceded the pandemic right, so our efforts partnering with initiatives such as *pennacool.com* to promote online education and online learning has been going on for 12 years. And we are very, very happy to continue those efforts during these times where the need for online learning is accentuated. We have been happy to expand our services into new communities, new areas, that did not have broadband access before during these times. We have been happy to deliver Internet access connectivity as part of our corporate social responsibility to student support centres across the country, so that those who may not have access at home can go to the student support centres and have Internet access.

We have been pleased to continue to provide devices to students to ensure that, you know, those who do not have the means to connect can have an option, can have an alternative, can have a vehicle by which they can continue their online learning. And we are very, very pleased and look forward to, and invigorated in working together with this Committee and the rest of our colleagues to see how we can continue the successes and grow our reach even further to touch every single one of our children from across the nation. So we are hyped to be here. We are pumped to be here and we are looking forward to the outcome of these deliberations.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you very much, Mr. Prescod. I am really happy to hear all our telecom providers so fervently boasting of their quality of service and their reach in Trinidad and Tobago. Because I will tell you, the reason that we have gathered you esteemed people here before us today, because one of the consistent recurring themes that we have encountered, this is our fourth enquiry, we have had several stakeholder groups covering the gamut of public schools, government-assisted schools, students with special needs, and stakeholders in all these regards, and the recurring theme that we have heard in the context of education in the pandemic, are issues with—and these are not exclusive to Trinidad and Tobago by any means, but of course we reside here so we have to see what we can do to deal with the gaps—are issues related to devices and access to devices, which we, like

every other country in the world, have faced because the pandemic basically forced life online as it were and education was not excluded from that.

The other issues we faced included in addition to devices an appropriate number of devices per household and per learner in the household because we know that work situations went online at home, in addition to education situations within some cases, more than one child or learner in the household having to need access to devices, is the issue of access to Wi-Fi and consistent quality Wi-Fi. Particularly in rural areas there were significant levels of complaints and the quality of Wi-Fi and consistency of Wi-Fi, and also the affordability factor, and whether people in the lower socioeconomic demographics could actually afford the Wi-Fi, although many of the providers have indicated they provided special packages, et cetera.

If you will permit me, I would like to give some reference to what has happened internationally and the United Nations has long advocated that it is a right, and in the context of the pandemic, education being a right, has to be taken in the context of access to education under pandemic conditions, which means if you do not have a device, or you do not have consistent Wi-Fi, or you cannot afford Wi-Fi, you have no education, so your right is being infringed upon.

So while we may have had systems that may have worked before, certainly, our systems and our standards and our parameters would have had to change during the pandemic to equal the playing field to ensure that every student, particularly those in vulnerable situations, have access to education. Otherwise, their rights are being infringed.

And a quote from three main articles as we start this morning. One, is from a group called “Save the Children”. It is dated the 2<sup>nd</sup> of March, 2021, and it is a response to the global humanitarian responses to COVID-19. And I quote:

“A year into the COVID-19 pandemic children across the world have lost an average of 74 days of education each due to school closures or a lack of access to remote learning.”

Seventy-four days, this is since the start of the pandemic—

“Save the Children said... more than a third of the standard global 190-day school year.”

So 74 days out of the average 190 school day—

“In total, an estimated 112 billion days of education have been lost altogether... 12 billion days of education...with the world’s poorest children disproportionately affected.

New analysis by the child rights organisation of data for 194 countries and different regions...”—



across the globe—“...shows that children in Latin America and the Caribbean, and South Asia, missed out on almost triple the education of children in Western Europe.”

That is us.

“Broken down at regional level, the difference in lost days of education becomes painfully clear, Save the Children”—went on to say—

- “Both in Latin America and the Caribbean, and South Asia, children went through around 110 days without any education;
- Children in the Middle East lost 80 days...;
- Children in Sub-Saharan Africa lost an average of 69 days;
- In East Asia and the Pacific...lost an average of 47 days;
- In Europe and Central Asia...lost...an average of 45 days;
- In Western Europe alone, it was 38 days.”

So in the Caribbean, Latin America and South Asia 110 days, the largest number of days lost due to either no access to education or no devices.

Another document which is a “Policy Brief: Education during COVID-19 and beyond”, stated that: “The COVID-19 pandemic has caused the largest disruption of education in history, having already had a near universal impact on learners and teachers around the world, from pre-primary to secondary schools, technical and vocational... and training...institutions, universities, adult learning, and skills development establishments. By mid-April 2020, 94 per cent of learners worldwide were affected by the pandemic, representing 1.58 billion children...from pre-primary to higher education, in 200 countries.”

Primarily because of an access and inability to access devices, Wi-Fi or an inability to afford these devices. So again, that is why you goodly people are here.

And finally, from the Economic Policy Institute with an article titled, “COVID-19 and student performance, equity, and U.S. education policy. Lessons from pre-pandemic research to inform relief, recovery, and rebuilding.” It is by Emma Garcia and Elaine Weiss, September 10, 2020:

“Pandemic relevant research offers key lessons as education system respond to the coronavirus crisis”

And I will just quote two of the main headings of a very voluminous document:

“Research regarding online learning and teaching shows that they are effective only if students have

consistent access to the internet and computers and if teachers have received targeted training...support for online instruction.”

And access to devices themselves.

“Research on chronic absenteeism and on remote learning reinforces the urgency of providing appropriate support to children who are least prepared and”—have access to devices and—“those at risk of becoming disengaged and eventually dropping out.”

And it goes on to talk about the difference of engagement between on a telephone or a cell phone, and a computer because they are largely different in terms of how they engage students. So I just wanted to set the context to the kind of significant challenges that students are facing around the world and in particular students in the Caribbean, Latin America and Southeast Asia.

So, if I could start by directing the first question to Mrs. Cynthia Reddock-Downes of TATT in the issues papers you provided you indicated that TATT would have started a universal service initiative project. Could you give us a sense of the feedback, Mrs. Downes, that you have received, if you have that data, from Internet users in the country and the challenges that would have been encountered in switching education and other sectors to an online environment at the start of the pandemic and certainly into the first six months of the pandemic?

**Mrs. Reddock-Downes:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Certainly, in the first six months of the pandemic what we sought to do was to, first of all, provide a far as possible additional spectrum to ensure that the services that were provided online could meet the capacity requirements of the general public and in particular the schools as well. Now, since that time we have had other initiatives as well.

**10.45 a.m.**

So for example, we have had a universal service initiative to provide devices for students of public schools. And so far with those allocations of those devices we understand that the feedback has been positive. As a matter of fact, I think over 6,000 of those devices have already been distributed to schools and to principals, and the response has been good because what it means now is that those students who originally, as we said earlier, where you would have had perhaps just one mobile phone for an entire household, students within families would now each have their own device and therefore would be able to access the services, online educational services available.

**Mr. Chairman:** In terms of the usage in Trinidad and Tobago, would you have had a sense of the

gaps that exist?—because all feedback from the stakeholders in our first three inquiries was profound, to say the least. In terms of the gaps in particularly rural areas, and while the stakeholders who are with us today, and we certainly will have questions from later on, have indicated their coverage was 90 and 95 per cent, that has not been our feedback at all. And there has been significant questions about the quality and consistency of service provided particularly in rural areas in Trinidad and Tobago.

**Ms. Reddock-Downes:** Of course and certainly the pandemic highlighted a few things. One of them is affordability issues. I think, you know, even where the coverage is particularly good or available, what we found is that several households were unable to access the coverage, access the facilities, because they just could not afford them. And you know at the Authority what we try to do is to think about how we can design initiatives and projects to address that particular situation. And we have turned to a great extent to our universal service fund to try to see how we could provide or reduce that gap for those who cannot afford to have devices or to pay for the access that is required. So the right in terms of affordability, we found that that was much more significant than we originally thought. In terms of gaps in connectivity, we also found that there were areas that were underserved meaning that even though they had some services they did not have the services at the standard that were required to support the education services. And as such, we have also tried to design universal service projects that would address the underserved aspect of the connectivity in those locations. So, yes we have found that there are gaps and those gaps were perhaps more significant than we recognized and it was largely because of the underserved elements, not the fact that the area was not served at all. Thank you.

**Mr. Chairman:** And finally, before we move, I move to Ministry of Public Administration and Digital Transformation. In terms of your universal services project which targeted persons who are visually and hearing impaired, we have had several, in our last enquiry, a wide gamut of groups that service persons with special needs and disabilities and they have relayed some really disturbing and profound gaps indeed. What has the outcome been of this initiative where you are concerned? It is a project, so it is not a policy, and are there plans for expansion to the wider community of persons with learning disabilities and special needs because they have rights to education also?

**Ms. Reddock-Downes:** That is correct. In the end it is not about leaving anyone behind. Certainly our project to provide subsidies for persons with disabilities, initially it had targeted those persons

with hearing impairments and visual impairments and we also initially targeted children between the ages of 12 and 18 years.

We have had some measure of take up but certainly not at the levels that we expect to have and so, what we have done is that we have actually extended the programme to children from age five upwards, with the approval of their parents, to also have access to the subsidy for the persons with disabilities. It is our intention as well to look at persons with other types of disabilities because in the year, as you have said, and which is quite accurate, there are a number of persons with disabilities who do not have access to ICTs and it is our intention that, as far as we possibly can, that those who cannot afford to have that access we assist in doing so. So far the take up has been, we have taken up, we have had enthusiastic persons actually making themselves available for the subsidy however, we do intend to extend the initiative further to make sure that it addresses the needs of all our persons with disabilities.

**Mr. Chairman:** Member Indarsingh has a question. Go ahead member Indarsingh, please.

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Thank you very much, Chairman. To the CEO of TATT. If I could recollect and based on your submission that you, TATT, signed an MoU with the Ministry of Education on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of October, 2020, to provide approximately 10,000 devices. Could you indicate to this Committee what is the status of this MOU?

**Ms. Reddock-Downes:** Thank you very much, Mr. Indarsingh. The MOU was signed with the Ministry of Education to make sure that the services that we were providing to public schools met the needs of the Ministry and of the student population generally. We have provided all the devices that we agreed to provide via our two partners in the project, and the partners were TSTT, Bmobile and Digicel who ably assisted us in making sure that those devices came to Trinidad and Tobago as soon as possible, and certainly at the time, it was a difficult time for actually receiving such a large number of devices since devices were required throughout the world at that time in large quantities. So they were able to procure the devices for us in very short order and make them available to us together with SIM cards and connectivity for an initial period of three months.

What has happened recently is that the Authority has agreed to provide those devices with connectivity up until the end of the current school term. So we will be extending the connectivity for students from public schools, not only for three months now but essentially for a period of about six months to make sure that we are able to access education and the educational platforms and services available to

them for them to attend school. I can tell you that looking at the information that has been provided from the Ministry of Education that was required under the MOU, we have seen that the devices have been distributed throughout Trinidad to many, many schools in Trinidad, of all various denominations, and government schools and so on and when we last got information from the Ministry we had information on the distribution of about 6,000 to 7,000 devices.

There are still some devices to be given out and in my view based on the discussions we had with the Ministry recently, those should be given out within the next couple of weeks. So actually it would not be much longer than that. And so we are very, you know, we are happy with the success of the MOU so far, and the fact that we are able to provide devices to families and to children from public schools who do not have that facility available to them earlier in the year.

The discussions with the Ministry of Education started in April of last year when they approached us and recognizing that there were deficiencies with regard to devices and deficiencies with regard to connectivity at their schools, and so after numerous discussions and so on, I have been trying to get to see what we could do in the soonest possible time to alleviate the situation. We felt that initially devices—because at that time there was a gap, the Ministry had a gap of perhaps about 16,000 devices at the time and in addition to requesting members of the public and commercial enterprises or organizations to assist, we felt it was important that the Authority make devices also available. Because in the end is not only about connectivity, it is also about having the devices so that you can connect, and it is also about if you cannot afford to have a device then you should have one to be able to access the education system. And in our view and certainly based on the information that we have which arose from the MOU we are fairly satisfied with what we have done so far with the Ministry of Education. Thank you.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. One of the—

**Mr. Indarsingh:** As a follow-up, Chairman.

**Mr. Chairman:** Go ahead.

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Chairman, so out of the initial MOU, after 13 months into the pandemic we have not distributed the full 10,000 if I could get that clear, and additionally, this Committee has been provided with information. I think about 35, between 35,000 to 36,000 students are without devices. Does the Trinidad and Tobago Telecommunications Authority intend to pursue a further MOU with the Ministry of Education to try and reduce this gap in terms of the lack of devices which are existing

out there in relation to students within the education system?

**Mr. Chairman:** Is that question for Mrs. Reddock-Downes, member Indarsingh?

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Yes, certainly.

**Mr. Chairman:** Okay.

**Ms. Reddock-Downes:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you Mr. Indarsingh. What we have done so far is that we have provided the 10,000 devices to the Ministry of Education. We do not have any plans at this time to add any more devices. However, what we are also doing is again in consultation with the Ministry of Education is that we are providing Wi-Fi at schools. And this Wi-Fi at school was intended to bring blended learning—make available blended learning that is required at this time. During consultation and discussion with service providers, we have—and the Ministry of Education they have provided us with a list of schools that are requiring Internet access and also those that do not have Internet access to the standard required. And so we are currently working with service providers to make sure that we can provide the Wi-Fi that is required at the public schools and at the same time make sure where it is already provided that the standard of the Wi-Fi and the ability of students who access the Internet is at the required level. Thank you.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. I want to move the question now to Mr. McKellar, the Permanent Secretary Acting in the Ministry of Public Administration and Digital Transformation. Mr. McKellar, can you give us a sense of if the Ministry has done an assessment of the digital space in Trinidad and Tobago given that we have had to translate, in an emergency manner had to translate online—working online education and what presently are the gaps that exist in terms of devices and also after that moving to your project related to access centres and what—give us an overview of that and where that project is as it stands in terms of accessing in particularly rural areas?

**Mr. McKellar:** Thank you, Chair. In terms of the assessment of the digital space as you put it, the Ministry for itself has not conducted such an assessment but we would rely heavily upon our agency, the Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago. As you may be aware, the Authority has currently embarked on its Digital Inclusion Survey 2021, which would provide a lot of the information that would speak to the level of coverage that exists nationally across Trinidad and Tobago. So we would rely on TATT in that regard. We would also be relying upon information from the Ministry of Education as it relates to children and the extent to which they have connectivity, whether it is at their homes connectivity, at schools and other agencies. So there is connectivity and there is also the issue

of devices. I think, member Indarsingh mentioned just now 35,000 students still without devices. So while the Ministry for itself has not embarked upon such a study, we are relying upon our agencies and others to provide us with that information and take the appropriate measures.

**Mr. Chairman:** And the access centers—

**Mr. McKellar:** Right.

**Mr. Chairman:** In terms of Marac, Guayaguayare, Cumana, Penal, Carenage, Todds Road, et cetera, first of all what was the metric used for deciding on these areas to start with? Was there an assessment done a field survey, et cetera, and what are the intentions of these access centers and how far has the project reached?

**Mr. McKellar:** Okay, so again the initiative to establish and roll out the ICT access centres was intended to provide access in those, as we described it, underserved communities. So the current locations would have been based really upon an earlier digital divide or digital inclusion survey that TATT had commissioned some years ago. So the decision is based upon empirical evidence, in terms of those communities where access to Internet Wi-Fi, a wide range of ICT services, are not available. So clearly the six operational centers were based on the results of the ICT, the Digital Divide Survey.

**Mr. Chairman:** Before I move to—

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Chairman, could I ask when this digital device survey as initiated and completed?

**Mr. Chairman:** Yes.

**Mr. McKellar:** Thank you, member; through you Chair, I think the last survey that was done prior to the one currently being undertaken by TATT and CSO was in 2014. The ICT access centers, I believe, have been in operation since 2015.

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Certainly, Chairman, if I could recommend because I think that given the fact to what we have heard from the PS, this needs to be reviewed, because for example I think that there is the need probably to increase the number of access centers, and I also heard—I am using it in the context of—and I would not name because I know school principals might get into trouble but yesterday a school principal called me in my constituency to tell me that she has given up on the Ministry of Education in terms of providing Internet and connectivity to the school, and she asked me if I could intervene and try and get one of the service providers to provide that sense of connectivity for the benefit of the stakeholders in the school. And this is why I am saying that there needs to be a review and probably increasing access in terms of connectivity, and also I heard when

the CEO of TATT was speaking that they were charged with the responsibility of the provision of Wi-Fi and connectivity in schools. Thirteen months into the pandemic I am saying that while we are hearing all the mantras of leaving no child behind, children are indeed being left behind and they are in a state of wilderness at the moment in terms of their educational development.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you.

**Mr. Forde:** Mr. Chairman.

**Mr. Chairman:** Yes, go ahead, go ahead, Mr. McKellar.

**Mr. Forde:** Just a slight thing on that, the issue of Wi-Fi in schools—but to my knowledge schools are—children are out of schools. So I think the major concern should be the connectivity surrounding the schools to ensure that the homes have the access. So I just need to get that clarified in terms of, you know, why we are placing so much emphasis on the school building itself having the Internet access, and not necessarily be the communities, the community centres, the village councils, the sports clubs, and I think those are the areas that we need to place the emphasis on. Thanks, Mr. Chair.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. Well, I think it works both ways, I think, because they are some cadres, I think Standard 5 students and Forms 5 and 4 and 6 are back in school, so the schools, some schools also need Internet access. But I want to ask Mr. McKellar, also, if there is a particular strategy involved in working with the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, because it cannot be an ad hoc, this Ministry doing this, this Ministry doing this. I am presuming that because you are the Ministry of Public Administration and Digital Transformation you may be the nexus Ministry to determine what the needs are, where the gaps lie and devise some sort of policy and plan in terms of using the data that you have to say, well, this area needs an access centre. These schools have access or these schools have connectivity, and if you actually have that information at this moment from your partner Ministries.

**11.05 a.m.**

**Mr. McKellar:** Okay. Thank you, Chair. Just to go back a bit to an earlier point that was raised by member Indarsingh where he spoke to the need for more access centres. I would just want to indicate that in our response, we did advise the Committee that we do intend to roll out a further 13 ICT access centres across Trinidad and Tobago, during the course of the current fiscal, eight to be rolled out by the Ministry itself and five utilizing TATT's Universal Service Fund. Of course—

**Mr. Chairman:** And what areas are they going to be? Do you have the information as to what areas



they are going to be in, these 13?

**Mr. McKellar:** As far as the eight that the Ministry intends to roll out, I could give you the locations for three, which should be in short order, before June. We are looking at Beetham, Beetham Gardens; La Pastora, Santa Cruz and La Horquetta. Under TATT, TATT will be rolling out Lopinot—a centre in Lopinot, one in Toco, another in Roxborough, Moruga and Fifth Company. Another five locations that would make up the MPADT's eight, would be identified in due course. But, again, we are continuing to work with TATT, and to look at the outcomes of the digital inclusion survey to be more precise in terms of the areas of need.

**Mr. Chairman:** And are the ones in Cumana, Guayaguayare, Marac, Penal, Carenage and Todds Road fully operational, at this time?

**Mr. McKellar:** They are fully operational. As per our response to the Committee's written request for responses, we did indicate that, I think, at the Todds Road Centre, there is currently no Wi-Fi patio, that is to say, there is Internet connectivity within the centre, but as far as the external patios, we do not have Wi-Fi, but we do intend to address that in short order.

**Mr. Chairman:** Member Beckles?

**Ms. Beckles:** Yes. Okay. So thank you very much, Chair, and just to follow up on a couple questions that I wanted to ask, which really has to do with the issue of data collection as it relates to the usage of the Internet. I know that I got some information from Digicel that spoke of 84 and 98 per cent respectively, but my main concern is two issues. Is there a policy as it relates to any set of special packages for persons with disabilities? And the issue of the rural communities, what sort of reach, in an actual sense, based on your research and analysis and feedback? I mean, I can talk of some of my communities in the north coast that really do not have good Internet access. And the last thing is the issue of broadband connectivity, particularly for rural communities.

**Mr. Chairman:** This is for both Digicel and TSTT. Right?

**Ms. Beckles:** Yes, please.

**Mr. Chairman:** So, if we could start with Ms. Agard on that. And good morning, again, Ms. Agard.

**Ms. Agard:** Right. So, good morning again, Chairman and members of the Committee. So I have listened to concerns expressed by you Chairman and other members on the Committee in relation to complaints about broadband coverage in Trinidad and Tobago. Based on work that was done by the industry, as part of the Road Map to Recovery we looked at, collectively, at our various serving

technologies and networks in Trinidad and Tobago. And on the basis of that work that we did, not any government agency, we determined that we have 95 per cent broadband coverage, geographic coverage, in Trinidad and Tobago. So, when we speak to—and on the basis of the analysis that we did then as far as—

**Mr. Chairman:** Just for clarity, Ms. Agard, what does that mean, 95 per cent broadband coverage? Is it a geographical 95 per cent? Is it a population 95 per cent?

**Ms. Agard:** A population.

**Mr. Chairman:** Could you break it down for us?

**Ms. Agard:** Population coverage. Right?

**Mr. Chairman:** So, 95 per cent of 1.4 million people? Is that what you are talking about?

**Ms. Agard:** Yes, absolutely. So when we looked at the analysis that we had done, we determined that there were three communities that do not have broadband access. They were Bonne Aventure, La Lune and Iacos. Right? So that was our analysis. This is not any, as a consequence of any digital device surveys. This was us collectively looking at the various networks that we have deployed in Trinidad and Tobago. So what is interesting, is that notwithstanding—sorry, I am getting a lot of feedback. I do not know if somebody—is everybody on mute?

**Mr. Chairman:** Go ahead.

**Ms. Agard:** What is interesting, Chairman, is that when you look at the broadband subscriptions uptake on the fixed side—and I will speak to the mobile side in a little bit—it is 84 per cent uptake of households. So 80 per cent of the 401,000 households in Trinidad and Tobago have high-speed broadband Internet access. Right? So that speaks to speeds of 10 megs or more. So, there is a gap between take up and coverage. So, in other words, so while we have 95 per cent broadband coverage, by population, you are only seeing 84 per cent take up, which speaks to clearly an affordability issue. Right? So, it is clear that some families are challenged in relation to being able to access the networks that are available to such families.

On the mobile side, I did not hear the CEO of TATT speak to this, but in terms of mobile Internet uptake, that is currently 55 per cent of the population. So while we have 1.9 million subscribers, which gives us a penetration of 144; 55 per cent of every hundred people in the country have Internet access or data capability on their mobile devices. These are significant penetration levels. And let me just say, for the purposes of this Committee and for anyone who is listening, these broadband penetration

levels, in terms of subscription uptake, is among the highest in the Caribbean and compares, quite favourably, to that which exists in the so-called First World countries.

But, let me speak specifically to, as well Chairman, if you will give me an opportunity, to talk to a specific project that the major providers along with other key stakeholders, including Massy and PBS Technologies have embarked on.

**Mr. Chairman:** Could I ask you—because I want to follow up on a question based on the information, and we welcome the information that you are giving us here. When you say you have 80 per cent of the 95 per cent coverage in household access, could you give us a sense of if you have data pointing to the level of increase in usage between March 2020 and March 2021, in terms of how we could quantify the difference in us moving online and the uptick in digital service use in your customer base?

**Ms. Agard:** Okay. So, I have the year-on-year increases. I do not know if TATT could speak to the quarter-on-quarter increases, because there is always a lag with the supply of data from TATT. So the last data we had goes to, only to December 2020, and I could speak to, as at December 2020 with 351,900 fixed broadband subscriptions. That represents a 2.9 per cent increase versus the prior year. So as at December 2019, between December 2019 and December 2020, there was a 2.9 per cent increase, year-on-year increase, in terms of fixed broadband subscription uptick.

**Mr. Chairman:** All right. Just before you go into your projects, so that we do not lose trend of thought here, I would like to go to Mr. Smith to give us a sense of his company, that is Digicel's assessment of, so we could compare apples to apples of what their coverage is, their customer base has been, in terms of the provision for the pandemic. So, Mr. Smith.

**Mr. Smith:** Sure. Thank you. Ms. Agard, I think, accurately communicated what is happening in the industry, that 84 per cent of households do have fixed and just over 50 per cent of subscriptions are regularly assessing mobile Internet. To speak to what we have seen in our customer base over this past year, we have definitely seen a growth of consumption. And Chandrika, perhaps, you could relate what we have seen in terms of subscriber and traffic growth throughout that year.

**Mr. Samaroo:** Sure. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Smith. We have seen on our network an increase in the usage for the fixed network of 56 per cent in the last 12 months, and our mobile network, a top-line increase in usage of about 64 per cent. When you drill it down to a per user perspective, we have seen that our data users from the mobile network has grown by about 18 to 20 per cent per user—

this is their usage—and on the fixed network a 47 per cent increase in usage. So we see a lot more activity happening for many activities across the day on those networks.

**Mr. Smith:** And that is primarily driven by the video consuming applications that folks are using for education and work.

**Mr. Chairman:** So, my next question is not meant to be vulgar, in any way. You all are making more money?

**Mr. Smith:** That is not entirely accurate.

**Mr. Chairman:** Okay. But it means that you are providing services at a lower cost?

**Ms. Agard:** Not true at all, Sir. [*Laughter*]

**Mr. Smith:** So, if I could, if you observe how and it is consistent across the three providers here, especially, if you look at the fixed side and even the mobile packages that people use, that the volume of consumption is not how folks are charged. So, people are using more of the allotments that they received inside of their packages. So the home services, for example, that increase in consumption by users was not accompanied within the increase in revenue.

**Mr. Chairman:** I am glad you all cleared that up. [*Laughter*] Thank you very much, Mr. Smith. Ms. Agard, you were going to talk about a project and then we will go to member Nakhid for his questions. So, Ms. Agard, you could continue and then member Nakhid you can pose your questions please.

**Ms. Agard:** Indeed. Thank you so very much. And let me add, from our perspective, we have also seen a significant increase in data usage, both on our fixed and our mobile networks. In fact, we invested significantly in additional capacity, which will give us more access to the World Wide Web. So our experience in terms of increase in Internet usage is very similar to that of Digicel.

But let me come to our Low-Income Households Internet Provision Project. So, again, as part of the Road Map to Recovery Committee, we had worked with some stakeholder groups, including the Archdiocese in Port of Spain, looking at this whole question of access to devices and Internet access for low-income households. As a result of extensive discussions with key stakeholders, including the Ministry of Education, the three major operators—my colleague Digicel and Columbus Communications, FLOW—have come up with an offer for such low-income households of a hundred-dollar package, VAT inclusive, allowing a 15-meg download speed to 6,000 households. So we would split the households: 2,000 TSTT, 2,000 Digicel and 2,000 FLOW. And we are currently working with the Ministry of Education, who is in the process of doing a means test for those students,

based on their informal survey have indicated that they do not have Internet access at their homes. We are literally about to launch it. So the two key stakeholder groups are the Ministry of Education and the Catholic Archdiocese, acting as coordinator with other denominational schools. So we have received from them a list of students at their schools who have indicated that they do not have Internet access at home.

So, in addition to all of the other things that we have done as a specific response to COVID, including increased investment in our networks to expand our Internet capability, we are also about to launch this particular project. We have participated in the devices programme with TATT. We have also participated in various Wi-Fi initiatives. And the other product that we launched last year, along with our colleagues at Digicel, is what we call a “Be Productive Mobile Plan” which is at \$149, \$167 VAT inclusive, which is designed, specifically, for students and it is a 30-day plan with five gigs of data and 1,800 on net minutes and free access to certain platforms like Zoom, et cetera, to facilitate remote learning. So, I think, as an industry, we have more than responded in a very responsible way to the demands of our customers as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. Before I go to member Beckles, if you could put a pin there, Ms. Agard. I inadvertently forgot to give Mr. Prescod a chance to give his company, FLOW’s perspective on this same question in terms of customer base and usage during the period in consideration. So, I apologize Mr. Prescod, and then we will go back to member Beckles and then member Nakhid. So, go ahead Mr. Prescod, please.

**Mr. Prescod:** Hi! Hi! Thank you, Chairman. I will add to what my colleagues would have shared. Yes, Internet research grew dramatically during the period. Ours was roughly around 40 per cent. Of course, we are on the fixed side, so we do not have a mobile network. We are on the fixed broadband side. We would have seen that increases, and as Abraham from Digicel would have articulated, you know, our packages are not based on how many megabytes or gigabytes you download. It is your monthly fee regardless. Right? And what we have had to do, to allow customers to operate at home, we even had to increase package speed. So actually, you know, if a customer had a 50-meg package or 75-meg package, we have had to increase that package feed to 100 megs so that the performance would be more in line with what they need at no additional price. So it has not been at all, Mr. Chairman, a revenue increase game. It has really been about absorbing a lot of increased demand from our customers and, you know, working with our customers during these very, very difficult economic

times to ensure that they could continue to work and study at home.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. You know, while I appreciate all that everyone has said, there are jurisdictions around the world that have really—and all jurisdictions would tell you, the one sector that has grown significantly in the pandemic is the ICT sector and the Internet provision sector and the technology sector. And those companies that are so grounded, have seen significant growth in many different ways because their customer base now has to depend on online services more than ever before, and the world is more than likely not going to go back to what it was before if these companies are as innovative as they usually are. So, I think there is room also for an understanding that well, this is a social imperative—

**Mr. Prescod:** I am sorry to interrupt you there, Mr. Chairman. But you have to put that into the context in relation to what was the broadband penetration prior to the pandemic. So, as Ms. Agard would have mentioned, Trinidad's broadband penetration was already over 80 per cent prior to the pandemic's onset. Right? So there is not much room to grow outside of those who cannot afford. Right? It is not as if there are other markets and other jurisdictions where the pre-pandemic penetration of its broadband might have been 40, 45 or 50 per cent. So they had room to grow to 70, 75 or 80 per cent penetration. But because of the level of competitiveness in Trinidad and Tobago, the penetrations were already at 80 per cent. Right? Most of the homes, well over 90 per cent of the homes had access.

Now, I do agree with the certain concerns of the other members, member Indarsingh and so on, you know, we do have to focus on that 5 per cent who do not. All right? So I do not want us to forget the 5 per cent who do not have access because we shout about the 95 per cent that do. Right? So I do appreciate that. But in the 95 per cent that do have access, as I said, well over 80 per cent of them already had service. So there really was not that much room to grow to see that sort of phenomenal growth that other jurisdictions may have observed. And, of course, I open the floor to my colleagues who, you know, disagree or add to that as they see fit.

**Mr. Chairman:** Well, I would add one thing to that. While you may have had a significantly high penetration percentage of 80 per cent, in other jurisdictions, what we have seen is those who have had Internet services have bumped up their packages significantly when they could afford it. So that added to their coffers in those jurisdictions. I do not know if that is the case in Trinidad and Tobago. Member Beckles.

**Ms. Agard:** Chairman, we cannot hear you.

**Mr. Chairman:** Member Beckles, go ahead please.

**Ms. Beckles:** Yes, thank you much, Chair. I really want to get back to an issue that is very important to me, and that is the issue of the—I mean, whilst we talk about 90 per cent broadband connectivity—90 per cent broadband, and in relation to Internet 95 per cent, if I am correct. Can I really get an appreciation as to what happens in the north coast areas? And I am being very specific, the areas of Blanchisseuse, Paria, Morne La Croix, Heights of Aripo, and Wallerfield, for both Digicel and Bmobile, where the farmers are complaining that, I mean, they simply are not getting much Internet access. Can I ask specifically for those communities please?

**Mr. Chairman:** Can I hear Ms. Agard on that please?

**Mr. Forde:** Mr. Chairman, and as they are answering that, they could include the Caura Valley, Mount St. Benedict, St. John Road and the Maracas Valley. Thank you.

**Mr. Chairman:** So, we have gone from north east to north-central east now.

**Mr. Forde:** We are still on the Northern Range. We are still on the Northern Range.

**Mr. Chairman:** I know we are on the Northern Range, but you see the gamut we have gone to while we are talking about 95 per cent. Ms. Agard, could you start please? Thank you.

**Ms. Agard:** Okay. So, I am going to ask my CTO, Mr. Kenrick Garcia, to respond to the issues in relation to those specific areas, because remember I think the question was being asked; one, mobile coverage and one broadband coverage, whether it is a WTTx network or fixed network. So, Kenrick?

**Mr. Garcia:** Hi, morning everybody. Thanks for the opportunity. So in the north coast area, specifically, what we did is this. As part of the deployment of our new 700 spectrums, we would have specifically targeted the north coast area. We obtained, I would think, may be more than a 100 per cent improvement in the service in that area. Because we would have supplied some of the maps, Mr. Chairman, to you guys as to what the service is in that area, so you could see a significant improvement, and we have also coupled that. What we also did, we ran a significant amount of fibre to take up all those locations on the north coast to ensure that we could actually improve the speeds, et cetera, in that whole area.

Are there some gaps still remaining in the area? The answer to that question is yes. And, by and large, the issues we are having there, because mobile signal is susceptible to things like the terrain, these types of issues have perennially been the major issue in some of these areas. However, we also in that

area have been suffering a lot of commercial power outages. So, what we have been doing is this. We have back-up power. We normally would cater between four to eight hours on our mobile locations as it relates to that. However, what we have been seeing are power outages. Again, it might be just because of sheer location, the crew to get there to do the repairs from a commercial standpoint. We have plenty of the issues there is because the power outage goes beyond the life of the battery. So, as a result, the site will go down, people will suffer some of that type of degradation in the mobile coverage.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. Mr. Smith, from your perspective?

**Mr. Smith:** Certainly. And I would let, again, I would turn to Chandrika Samaroo to answer, but what we have done during COVID and what our plans are, and as Mr. Prescod said, absolutely, we recognized that there are still gaps in coverage both on broadband and mobile and, you know, in our ability to affordably deliver that coverage is what we are trying to solve. Chandrika?

**Mr. Samaroo:** Sure. So, like Mr. Smith mentioned, we do recognize that there are gaps, not just in the north coast but in central as was mentioned as well, and these would be reflected in the maps that we have submitted to you that adequately demonstrates our coverage. Even before the onset of the pandemic, Digicel would have deployed an LTE network across the entire country, and we did that on a capacity band of spectrum. Right? Our 1,900 spectrum. During the pandemic, we augmented that network with the temporary spectrum that was awarded by TATT, and we also deployed our 700 megahertz LTE network which offers a lot better coverage due to its physical properties across the country.

In the north and central specifically, we do have both a 1,900 and a 700 megahertz presence, and we are incrementally upgrading during the course of the next 12 months to try to get 700 megahertz spectrum on as many sites as possible. We are also looking at, as Mr. Smith mentioned, innovative ways to address the cost to serve the challenge that we see. Because for many factors, the number of sites and site destinations that are required to extend our infrastructure to these areas are quite expensive, and they are not sustainable from a financial perspective to keep extending the network coverage in that way. So, alternative solutions are required and we are investigating that with our providers to be able to explore those over the next 12 months as well.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. Member Nakhid.

**Mr. Nakhid:** Thank you, Chairman. To Ms. Agard and to Mr. Smith, how reliant are those two



organizations on information from TATT since we have heard about TATT's last survey, I think, 2014 and some measure of implementation 2015, if I am correct? And what is the synergy possibly between TATT and those organizations? Because the figures, obviously, that we have heard, 95 per cent and 98 per cent, as you stated Chairman, do not reflect what we have seen on the ground, judging by some of the places that have been mentioned already and some that I could probably mention. So what kind of synergy and how reliant are those organizations on TATT?

**Mr. Chairman:** We will start with Ms. Agard, please. You are still muted.

**Ms. Agard:** Sorry. I do apologize, Chairman. So, as an industry, we are heavily reliant on information provided by TATT in the quarterly uptick surveys to give us an industry perspective as to where we are. So, the last quarterly TATT survey covers the period to December 2020. There is always a bit of a lag—[*Technical difficulties*]*—*data set provided and the information provided by TATT. And you are correct. The last digital device survey was done as, I think the PS indicated, in 2013/2014. So that survey would provide definitive information on where there may be access gaps in the country, where there is no Internet service or where there are unserved communities. Because, I think, as an industry, we cannot, you know, proceed on anecdotal evidence. We need to have definitive information. So we, particularly, look forward to the most current survey being undertaken by TATT, which might identify additional communities or unserved communities. That is outside of our preview.

**11.35 a.m.**

**Mr. Nakhid:** Well, Mrs. Agard, one second. Since you have just appropriately stated that since 2013/2014, that is a seven-year gap that there has not been any update; obviously that does not help you. It does not help your organization to adequately fill. And I know you cannot depend on something that is anecdotal but there must be some kind of synergy between your organization since apparently you seem to be doing well, although you said, no, you are not doing well. But there has been some profit being made, you are not here to lose money.

So having said that, can there be some synergy since we know that the snail's pace of possibly TAAT, and I say that with all respect, but there is a disconnect. There is a disconnect and pun intended, there is a disconnect and maybe if there is some synergy in getting that data up to date, it would help.

**Mr. Chairman:** Member Nakhid, let me help you. Let me just bring in Mrs. Reddock-Downes and we can clear up why there was a gap and she also indicated that there is a survey on the ground at the moment. Mrs. Reddock-Downes, please intervene.

**Mrs. Reddock-Downes:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. The last digital device survey was in fact completed during the period 2013 to 2014. What we have done since that time is that we have collected information from service providers on where, in their view, their coverage requirements—their coverage is at the moment and we have taken that information that has come in from the service providers and we have mapped that on GIS, to indicate where gaps—[*Technical difficulties*] Over the period 2013 to 2020, we had actually got information from service providers and of course we do go out and physically verify this information as well; we have connected with—[*Technical difficulties*]—our Internet service providers regarding their coverage.

We do have a lot information—[*Technical difficulties*]—on the GIS to indicate where the gaps are. In 2001 we have started a new survey which is called the Digital Inclusion Survey and that survey seeks to measure the digital divide but also which seeks to identify those persons who are not using ICTs. It also identifies those persons who require more skills to access and also it tells us about the gaps, the affordability gap as well. Because as I mentioned earlier, what the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us is that the gap between affordability and accessibility is greater than we expected and so we hope—[*Technical difficulties*]—service has started on the 17<sup>th</sup> of April—[*Technical difficulties*]—concerns have started on—[*Technical difficulties*]—with regard to both connectivity and affordability.

In this way we would be able to find out the population groups that are most at risk from being left behind at this time. So even though there was a period of six or seven years between the last survey, you have a considerable amount of information from the service providers that we have been able to use to identify various—[*Technical difficulties*]

**Mr. Nakhid:** Well, do you not see that could be problematic, Mrs. Downes? Do you not see that could be problematic? The service providers would not tell you of the areas when there is a possibility of them losing money in terms of how that cost, the cost profit would balance, would affect them. They would not go into areas that it would cost them to set up, and all their digital equipment and so forth and so on, and they would not make money in those areas but we would have citizens affected. So how could you rely on the service providers to give you that information?

**Mrs. Reddock-Downes:** Okay. If I may, Mr. Chair, the Authority also has a responsibility to provide services or to make sure that persons in areas where it may be uneconomical for service providers to operate, we also have a responsibility to make sure that those areas are served and that is why, based on the information on the—[*Technical difficulties*]—providers, we have been able to identify areas

where—[*Technical difficulties*—start to initiate projects for that gap. So, for example, the Authority is about to embark on projects together with service providers in areas that we know—[*Technical difficulties*—based on the information and having also complaints, because people do—[*Technical difficulties*—people do come to tell us the areas—that they do not have service.

In fact, we have a project that would be coming up very soon to address the area of Brasso Venado, Los Atajos; the St. John's Road in Tobago and other areas that we have identified based on the submission of service providers and the public, members of the public. Based on that information we have designed projects that we will be introducing very shortly to bring connectivity to those areas. And those areas would have been areas that have been recognized as possibly areas that may have been uneconomical to serve but at the same time the Authority's responsibility is to make sure that those areas are safe.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. Just before I go back to member Indarsingh, I want to bring in Mr. McKellar, the Acting PS in the Ministry of Public Administration and Digital Transformation. Now, a lot of the conversation in the last couple of minutes have focused on those vulnerable areas and those gaps members Beckles and member Forde identified and the stakeholders responded about the gaps in that north coast area. But from where you sit as the Acting PS in the Ministry of Public Administration and Digital Transformation, what kind of—the operative word here being “digital transformation”—what are the transformative initiatives that we can see in the next two, three quarters in Trinidad and Tobago that the Ministry has envisioned to deal with these gaps of access and Wi-Fi access and the possible impact on the lives of those citizens in the education sector, and by extension social services provision, et cetera, because they are significantly linked? You cannot have—even if you have access to Wi-Fi and connectivity and you do not have food and water, you are going to have some issues.

**Mr. McKellar:** Thank you, Chair. Excellent question and it is one that really falls squarely within our remit, although it is not only for us to address. Okay. So as far as the digital transformation is concerned, right now a lot of our efforts are geared towards the digital transformation of the public service. So, for example, that focuses heavily on the provision of many of Government services or as many of the Government services as possible online so that citizens do not have to visit a physical office to access services. Services are being made available online.

To that end there are three Ministries, three sectors that have been identified for a particular attention:

one obviously is the Ministry of Education to provide and ensure that all students at all levels have access to online learning facilities. In the third sector our Ministry would be the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services as a key Ministry that provides services to the less fortunate, the disadvantaged. We are also looking at that Ministry and I believe they are working closely with one of our agencies under the Ministry, iGovTT, to design and develop systems that would allow greater provision of services via online mechanisms.

The third Ministry, sector, under consideration or prioritized has been the Ministry of Health, particularly with respect to access and sharing of information between health institutions. So, for example, if somebody accessed a service at a health center or a hospital in San Fernando some time ago and they had cause to visit another centre in Arima, there would be easy flow of records between the centres. So those three have been particularly targeted for initial attention. More specifically—sorry.

**Mr. Chairman:** The next question I have for you is—and it would be translated to Ms. Agard and Mr. Smith and Mr. Prescod, is the issue of we are 13 months into the pandemic now and a lot of the emphasis has been placed on the Wi-Fi access, the provision of services, and very importantly, devices. What has been happening in the other jurisdictions is while there has been the acquisition of devices, there has been an omission of the servicing of those—and the maintenance of those devices, and what the Ministry of Public Administration and Digital Transformation’s policy is in terms of liaising with Education and stakeholders, and I guess TAAT, in terms of not having a junkyard end up in the country where we now have to order more devices in six months because we have not had a maintenance schedule for devices that we have acquired and devices that existed in the country and also transitioning devices into newer technologies as technologies become available to access different levels of service in the next couple of years.

**Mr. McKellar:** Okay. While the Ministry itself may not have been the one to develop, for example, the standards and the specs for the laptops and the tablets that would have been acquired, that would have been done between TAAT, iGovTT and the Ministry of Education. But I am pretty confident that the specs and standards that would have been developed for the initial acquisitions and those to come would have taken into consideration that they are being utilized by students, the kinds of rigour, the kinds of wear and tear that those devices are likely to be put through and therefore the acquisitions would have been to suit—yeah, but I think that I would defer to CEO, TAAT, to speak a little more

on that.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. Mrs. Reddock-Downes.

**Mrs. Reddock-Downes:** Thank you, Mr. Chair. Regarding the devices that we have provided, as part of the MOU between ours and the Ministry of Education, there is a warranty, a manufacturer's warranty and the devices, if there are any difficulties with it during the period of use, they can be repaired or replaced in that regard. And we are aware that the spares have actually been brought in by both service providers. So in the event that the devices need to be replaced before the end of their useful life that those additional devices are available from both service providers, Digicel and TS'TT. We have user agreements with the family, the Ministry of Education where the families or the students are expected to use the devices in a particular manner and they are required to sign formal agreements that they would treat the devices in as best as possible. So there are agreements that need to be signed by families and by students in that regard. So the Authority has, as far as it possibly can, put maintenance—[*Technical difficulties*—]in place to ensure that the device continues to the end of their useful life.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. Member Indarsingh.

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Thank you very much, Chairman. Very quickly, we have heard a lot of statistics and data here this morning and all that is well and good for public consumption but the reality of the challenges still exists. I heard from—Ms. Agard is speaking to the project under the auspices of the Archdiocese of Port of Spain and I hope—she said that it would also take into consideration other denominational schools. I hope, for inclusivity purposes, it takes into consideration schools under the purview of SWAHA, under the Maha Sabha, under the Presbyterian Board, under the Baptist community, under the Anglican church and so on.

**Ms. Agard:** Absolutely. And as I said, they are the coordinating agency for other denominational schools. So in the list of students who do not have Internet access and data provided, they collated information from principals of other denominational schools representing those communities that you just mentioned so that the list is a comprehensive list that we receive. You are absolutely correct.

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Thank you very much, Ms. Agard. Further to that, Chairman, in our documentation we would have heard that Digicel had formally requested temporary additional spectrum in March of 2020, and this was installed in terms of the access by May of 2020 and they have further requested the allocation of a temporary spectrum in terms of their broadband width and so on, and Digicel is

currently awaiting a response from the Telecommunications Authority. While I do not—I am not on the side of any service provider, I hope that the Telecommunications Authority will continue to meet and treat with the requests of the service providers, all in our quest to improve the broadband width and connectivity for the school children, especially vulnerable school children of our society. And if someone could clarify this issue of the cost of pole rental which is impacting upon the whole question of connectivity, just for my benefit, I do not know if other members of the Committee would want that information.

And in addition to that, the issue of reliability of service needs to be addressed because I speak in the context as a parent in terms of children who are in online classes. And I know for a fact that especially at the tertiary level, and so on, children are very apprehensive in the middle of the examinations, online submissions and so on, if service goes down what are the implications? For example, institutions, if you are writing, for example, an examination in Trinidad, you are online and it goes down, will that institution—let us say in Europe or North America, would they be aware of the challenges and how that will be resolved in the interest of the student and so on? I have known of situations where children have actually panicked in the middle of an examination.

**Mr. Chairman:** And I guess we can start with Ms. Agard and then go to Mr. Smith on that.

**Ms. Agard:** So, as I said, the reliability issue in terms of our network is something that we monitor on an hourly basis and we produce daily reports in terms of the performance of our—all of our network. And of course we are subject to, unfortunately, a lot of power outages from T&TEC and that has had an impact on our service ability in some areas. As far as the pole rental issue is concerned, I am assuming that that is a reference to T&TEC pole rental, we have certainly, at TSTT, recently concluded an agreement with T&TEC in relation to pole rental rates and we are very happy in terms of the outcome of those negotiations.

**Mr. Chairman:** Mr. Smith and then Mr. Prescod.

**Mr. Smith:** Sure. So first, member Indarsingh, you had mentioned the temporary spectrum; TAAT, yes, has issued that and we are working closely with them on that and they have been very helpful in us—you know, when we talk about the coverage, coverage is one challenge, and addressing the capacity of existing customers is another and working with TAAT, that has been helpful. That spectrum has been helpful.

With regard to pole rentals—I think that was raised in the documentations—I know from our side in

response to ideas on how we can more affordably address and further our coverage, there are a series of costs which, if lowered, can make it possible for us to reach further with our network. So that is the context within which that was brought up. In terms of reliability, Chandrika, if you could mention about reliability.

**Mr. Samaroo:** Sure. So as mentioned on the call earlier, T&TEC power outages do impact us. We do have, on every single one of our cell sites, a battery backup, as well as generators on all of our major cell sites with a, you know, five to seven-day run time. We also have, you know, redundant links to all of our major props, as well as redundant links internationally as well. So we have tried our best to ensure that our services are as reliable as possible. Unfortunately, we are still impacted by external factors such as fibre breaks, you know, when very tall vehicles just pull our fibres down, et cetera. And you would find that the most frequency losses of coverages is due to the time it takes to recover from that.

**Mr. Chairman:** Mr. Prescod.

**Mr. Prescod:** Yeah, hi. Thanks for bringing us in. As it relates to pole rental cost, it is a constraint. It is a challenge. Obviously as, you know, one of the themes that had been discussed on today's session is affordability of Internet, how do we make Internet more affordable. And as, you know, Digicel CEO Abraham mentioned, you know, if we have this input as a cost that is going to limit how affordable you can get. And the challenge of course when you go to these rural areas is that you have to attach to more poles and cover less homes. So, you know, for example, with a rural area—let me compare it to an urban area; you go to a nice urban area, you could attach to one pole and connect to five, six homes but when you go to a rural area it is reversed, you have to connect to five poles—attach to five poles to connect one home. And if that pole rental cost is prohibitive and, you know, when we look at the regional cost—when we benchmark it across the region, Trinidad by far is one of the highest—if not the highest, there is a pole attachment cost.

So that will limit our ability if we have to connect—attach to five, six poles to connect to that one home; that will limit our ability to say, “Let us offer that customer, you know, Internet for \$90 or \$99 a month”, and so on and so forth if it is we have to pay T&TEC over \$100 a month just to attach to those poles. So if there is an opportunity to work with the electricity company, you know, with a sort of a tiered range structure so, you know, where we go to these rural areas; they can consider a reduction in their pole rental costs, that would be a formula which may help us to get to be able to serve these

rural areas—[*Technical difficulties*]

**Mr. Chairman:** I think a good intermediary would be, of course, the Ministry of Public Administration and Digital Transformation.

**Mr. Prescod:** Yes. Yes. Correct. Correct. Absolutely. In terms of liability, so, you know, that is one of the things we have seen coming out of this whole pandemic is that expectation of our customers has increased significantly, you know, and member Indarsingh, you know, perfectly articulated some of the challenges. We place huge emphasis, just as Mr. Samaroo from Digicel would have mentioned, on network reliability, on redundancy, but there is only so much, you know, that you can do. There are going to be external breaks. There are going to be burning homes. There are going to be poles that are hit by trucks or trucks pulling down cables, that sort of stuff. And that is the reality of the network to be run because these networks are public networks; they are not, you know, private concealed networks. They are run on poles. They are external and they are exposed to the public. So our challenge as providers really, beyond the putting in the redundancies and so on, it is really to have that quick response so that when incidents do occur to be able to detect and respond and resolve as quickly as possible. But we fully acknowledge member Indarsingh's comments there and, definitely, it is one of the pillars upon which we place a huge emphasis on in ensuring our network is reliable as possible.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. I do not want to end this session, because we are coming up in just about 12 o'clock here, without dealing with what is a critical issue in education in Trinidad and Tobago and certainly around the globe because education is positive and education can be negative. And there is the issue of inappropriate content when children have access to the Internet, and I want to start with Mrs. Reddock-Downes on what TAAT's perspective and policy is on regulating inappropriate content to children who are in many instances at home online, going to school, and in some instances themselves transmitting inappropriate content and are vulnerable to inappropriate content, and also to the service providers and what their safeguards are in place as they provide these services to children on an increased level. So we would start with Mrs. Reddock-Downs on that.

**Mrs. Reddock-Downes:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would like to say that, you know, this whole area has occupied the mind of the Authority and the thinking of the Authority over the years and what we try to do as much as possible is to put public education programmes in place. As a matter of fact, on next week Tuesday, I think it is, we would actually be convening on TTT a live programme on keeping children safe online. We would be having a panel discussion as well as have persons being



able to call in live to the programme because we think it is just so important for us at this time to make sure that parents are aware of how they are to protect their children or children are aware of—

**Mr. Chairman:** Mrs. Reddock-Downes, I am sorry to interrupt you, but could you—because your bandwidth seems a bit challenging, could you just take off your video and we will hear you clearly.

**Mrs. Reddock-Downes:** Thank you.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you.

**Mrs. Reddock-Downes:** Yes, Mr. Chairman, is that better?

**Mr. Chairman:** Yes, thank you.

**Mrs. Reddock-Downes:** Right. So I was saying that this matter is very important to us at the Authority. We are convening a programme next week on TTT and that programme is meant to assist and to educate parents and children themselves about how to protect themselves online. The programme is a call-in programme and it is live and it is part of our public education programme to make sure that students make themselves available for this type of education. It is troubling for us at the Authority as well because as, you know, the Internet has become much more pervasive; it means that everybody has access to all kinds of content and regulation of the Internet is not something that is very easy to deal with at this time and what we try to do more than anything is to have a campaign of public education so that persons are in a position to protect themselves. But certainly, there is a lot of discussion taking place at the Authority with regard to content and particularly with regard to protection of the children on the Internet.

**Mr. Chairman:** From TAAT's regulatory perspective, are there mechanisms and programmes or systems that can act as protective devices or barriers to these sorts of inappropriate content and in some instances predatory behaviour?

**Mrs. Reddock-Downes:** Yes, certainly. If there are websites that carry contents that are inappropriate—[*Technical difficulties*]  
—that a child cannot see, and those kinds of things, then in those instances it would be appropriate that those sites—[*Technical difficulties*]  
—the Ministry of Education with regard to the devices—[*Technical difficulties*]  
—certainly with the Ministry of Public Administration and Digital Transformation—[*Technical difficulties*]  
—with regard to their own policies with regard to the Wi-Fi services they are providing. We are making sure as far as possible that children are protected from visiting those sites. I mean, it is not entirely fool proof but we have attempted as far as possible—[*Technical difficulties*]  
—students will.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. Mr. Agard, from TSTT's perspective in terms of providing protections for online learners.

**Ms. Agard:** Chairman, thank you very much. The whole issue about inappropriate access to content by children and other vulnerable groups in the society is obviously a huge issue. Unfortunately, we do not regulate the Internet, and while there is some technical capability to be able to block access to sites, we certainly could not do so without some, I think, legislative directive or legislative mandate.

**Mr. Chairman:** But if it is a—because you mentioned earlier on, and correct me if I am wrong, there are education packages that you have offered; packages geared to facilitating education. So with those packages certainly there can be some parameters that apply to those packages that you cannot wander around the Internet or go to X and Y site and it is limited to education-focused sites that are approved by the Education Ministry or the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services and the Ministry of Health, et cetera. Is that a possibility or is it beyond your remit as a provider?

**12.05 p.m.**

**Ms. Agard:** So what we have done, Chairman, is that the access to the online learning tools are free to the student as part of the package. So that is what we have done to ensure and to facilitate the online learning that is in place by the Ministry of Education, but I would like my CTO to specifically address the issue of blocking access to certain sites.

**Mr. Garcia:** So, Mr. Chairman, what it is, we can apply certain filters to the Internet. So what those filters do they block certain types of traffic. However, when we apply the filter, it is across the board, so everyone in the household—because more than likely the Internet is shared across the household—they will not be able to get access to all their applications and that, in our mind, because our customers they have been not happy with that type of arrangement, because it means it protects the child, but the parents would not be able to access the sites they want to go to, because the Internet is a shared resource. That is where the providers find themselves.

**Mr. Chairman:** But they are benefiting from your subsidized prices and lower packages.

**Mr. Garcia:** Well, again, the customer in their mind they are paying for a service which is Internet access. So they want to ensure they get their full whatever they want to use, and use it; they do not want to be limited by the providers. So that is the position the providers find themselves in, because this is a voluntary thing to say, “Ay, put on this filter for us that protects the Internet”, and that is the challenge the providers have.

**Ms. Agard:** I think that is why there are things that challenge this industry, like pirated video content that is interfering with our ability to provide subscription broadcasting services or cable TV services. We recognize as an industry that there is a challenge. From our perspective, we cannot be the Internet police in the absence of a clear legislative mandate coming from the Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago and so, perhaps, it is appropriate that we are addressing this august body.

**Mr. Chairman:** I thought you were going to say that. [*Laughter*] Thank you, Ms. Agard. Mr. Smith.

**Mr. Smith:** I agree. To holistically solve the problem yes, there needs to be some policy elements addressed, perhaps in a different forum, together as an industry, we can discuss. Technically we are ready to comply and work with whatever policy comes from that, but there are also tools that can be put in individuals' hands, and so we have done a couple of things specifically there in this period.

The first of which is partnering with the TTPS Cyber Crime Unit to do some webinars to educate families about online bullying and safety online practices. The second is, in our mobile application bit we have a service in there called "Safe to Net", which we provide free for two months, which provides the ability for parents to monitor and control, regulate children's activity online. Third, we recently included parental controls in our Wi-Fi mesh smart Wi-Fi product that is available for our home Internet users. So that product allows parents to set timelines, restrict certain sites. So we have tried to put those tools in parents' hands rather than control from the network side.

**Mr. Chairman:** Understood. Mr. Prescod.

**Mr. Prescod:** Yes, so I am in the unenviable position as always to follow my colleague. So pretty much they have captured the main areas of tackling this issue. Education, education, education, making parents aware so that they can take the necessary measures. And, of course, the service provider tools, where the service provider can provide tools for the parents, or parents can source their own tools to provide that sort of filtering management, determining which sites are there that the folks in the home can go to, and so on and so forth.

So that is basically at this time, until such time as the legislative environment evolves to one that allows ISPs to go in there and sort of either be informed of or advised of, or seek approval of certain sites that should not be permitted, as my colleagues at TSTT would have referenced. In the interim, definitely public education as well as providing those facilities in the hands of our subscribers to be able to manage the sites that the folks in the home go to. It is definitely—

**Mr. Chairman:** Just before I go to member Beckles and member Forde and their final questions,

because we are running out of time—Mr. McKellar, is that under consideration in terms of policy from the Ministry, those kinds of protections?

**Mr. McKellar:** At the moment no, but certainly our remit does include putting in place a number of policy positions that would address Internet usage although we might be focusing right now primarily on the mainstream public service, rather than the wider community. In that regard, I think we would look more towards the Telecommunications Authority as the standard setter. But also the Ministry of Public Administration and Digital Transformation is represented on a Children’s Registry Policy Committee that is being led at the OPM, Office of the Prime Minister. So I think through that mechanism there is space for us to make some contributions and recommendations.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. Member Beckles and member Forde, and then we have to go to our round robin wrap-up comments please.

**Ms. Beckles:** Hello.

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

**Ms. Beckles:** I just wanted to quickly ask a question that I think—or repeat a question that may not have been answered. It has to do with the issue of incentives, whether it be for businesses or other persons who are allowing the use of Wi-Fi, whether it be in certain public spaces, and the issue of communities, rural communities in terms of the cost, whether there is any consideration for special packages for those communities and, again, for the disabled, I had asked specifically for that. I went to, I think it was Moruga, recently as well, and they seem to have very poor Wi-Fi access.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. I can add to that because in the package submitted by TSTT—I remember in the media you rolled out two free Wi-Fi initiatives, I believe around the Queen’s Park Savannah and also Woodford Square. It may have been late 2019 or early 2020, and there were plans to roll out in rural areas and underserved areas, those Wi-Fi-free areas, and what has become of that, because that would have been one of the solutions I think that could have worked in areas that are underserved, and where communities are presently clamouring for some sort of service that is subsidized by the State at that level, through an agency like TSTT, and if that is still on the cards.

**Ms. Beckles:** Chair, just very quickly, the issue of the CSRs both in Digicel and TSTT. I mean, granted they spoke to us about the gaps and so, has that been one of the interventions to probably help some of the communities that are not certain as to what services are actually being provided? Thank you.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you. So I guess those two questions for Ms. Agard.

**Ms. Agard:** So I will let Kenrick speak to the public Wi-Fi initiative. Yes, we did roll out a free public Wi-Fi for 30 minutes in the morning and, I think, in the afternoon too in the Queen's Park Savannah and in Woodford Square, and we do have plans to also roll out similar Wi-Fi capabilities in other parts of Trinidad and Tobago. Kenrick, you want to talk to that a little bit further?

**Mr. Garcia:** Yes, so as part of an initiative we partnered with one of our partners, and we would have done the Queen's Park Savannah to roll out Wi-Fi. So that gives you, like twice a day you get like 30 minutes. You could come on, check your emails and that type of thing. We also did Woodford Square. Currently we have one more location we are currently looking at to actually—as an addition to that. Again, we are looking at all the various locations where we have coverage, and to see if there are additional areas we can supply the service.

**Mr. Chairman:** Well, it is interesting you started in Port of Spain basically, and I guess this was a pilot project. But certainly that would be so much more appreciated—without having any bias to Port of Spain whatever—in rural areas where there is so much more of a vulnerability. Is there a timeline on the roll-out of those kinds of initiatives, which I think are very admirable, in places like Moruga, deep south, where there is to me more of a greater need as articulated by many of the stakeholders who came before us. Those families can really use, because of their socio-demographic status, a free service, even for some hours of the day, which I think is a brilliant project.

**Mr. Garcia:** Actually we did look at several areas, including some of the rural areas like Point Fortin, Princes Town, all those areas. We did look at all of those areas, but as you know these types of initiatives are really capital intensive. So we got stuck just based on the fact that we needed to take them in small bites. So that is why we have been just rolling them out, however, we do them in small instalments because, again, the organization with its partner has been funding these types of initiatives. So hence the reason why we only got to the two. We are planning one again in this year, and as we go along we will be adding to that number.

**Mr. Chairman:** One for the year?

**Ms. Agard:** Well, no, no, no. One we have definitively planned, we are looking at others, but it is very difficult to say right now with any certitude what other areas we may consider because, of course, it is all dependent on the availability of capital.

**Mr. Chairman:** I can well imagine. Final call for member Forde, please.

**Mr. Forde:** Thank you again, Mr. Chairman. I just wanted to follow up on the rental poles concern.

I know MP Indarsingh brought it up, and I know Mr. Prescod from Flow spoke about concessions, spoke about a possible tier rated system. Seeing that we have the main providers there, we also have the Ministry there, in terms of a future collaboration—because again this is critical, especially in the rural remote areas where, as we know, the houses may not be close by and there may be a need in order to ensure that these poles are put in place in order to ensure connectivity. But what I did not hear from you, Mr. Chairman, is that we did not hear from PS McKellar on what are the Ministry's thoughts with regard to probably providing some sort of recommendation in going forward, in making some sort of concession with regard to this whole system of pole rental and other coming together, with regard to ensure at the end of the day no child be left behind during this pandemic as we try to ensure full connectivity in Trinidad and Tobago. Thanks.

**Mr. Chairman:** I think I did mention that Mr. McKellar and the Ministry are adequately poised to be the intermediary between T&TEC and these issues.

**Mr. McKellar:** Chair, if I may, just in response to the member's question. I think that particular matter falls more to the Ministry of Public Utilities, the issue of pole rentals, and any discussion between the utilities and the ISPs.

**Mr. Chairman:** But certainly as the Acting PS in the Ministry of Public Administration and Digital Transformation, you can be in excess—I will hopefully add that as a favour on your table.

**Mr. McKellar:** Sure.

**Mr. Chairman:** You could bring them together. Okay, we are certainly out of time. I am going to ask for closing comments, and starting with Mr. Prescod, from the Country Manager for Flow.

**Mr. Prescod:** Thank you, Chair, for giving me the opportunity to hold the mike first. So from a closing comment perspective, I really want to thank the Committee for giving me this opportunity to have this deliberation, for you all to share with us some of your concerns. I think it was instructive the feedback from the members about some of the previous sessions you all had, and some of the representations you all have had in terms of areas that are desperately unserved.

From our perspective, we have continued to invest every year well over US 1 million in expanding to new areas. So we have continued to build into new rural areas. At the end of last year, we would have done Chatham, which is sort of west of Point Fortin, Cap-de-Ville. We would have done areas in Barrackpore. Right now we are looking at areas in deep Sangre Grande and so on. So rest assured, where there is an economic case, even though the payback may be longer, we are fully committed to

continuing to expand.

We would acknowledge though that there are some areas, and this is where I heard member Nakhid talk about there is a disconnect. I do not think there is a disconnect, you know guys, we are saying the same thing. There is a 5 per cent of homes, and when you take 5 per cent of homes and you multiply that by the 400,000 homes in the country, there are 20,000 homes out there that need to be connected. Whether the exact number is 15,000 or 25,000, there are those homes that still need to be connected. So we are committed to working with the regulator through their universal service programme, with the industry, and whichever of a stakeholder is willing to partner with us, for us to get those remaining 15 to 25,000 homes connected, because we fully agree. I thank member Forde for his reiterating the point on seeing how we could partner as an industry; to see how we could seek some sort of tiered arrangement in rural areas to bring down the cost. So we are happy for those sort of discussions, those sort of ideas, and hoping that some of these items that we have discussed today can bear some fruit, and allow us to get access in some of those rural areas and connect more homes.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you, and just to follow your point. One of the resounding profound bits of commentary coming out of this is that while it may sound like 5 per cent or 10 per cent, we find in society that those are the persons in society who are always left at the end of the table. So you would find their screams are the loudest because for decades they have been left underserved. So it may be 5 per cent, while we are doing well with 90 per cent and 95 per cent, but those people are also important and have to be served. Next Mr. Smith, CEO of Digicel TT.

**Mr. Smith:** Chair, in the last two or three minutes closing, first thank you. Second, to member Beckles' question about CSR initiatives, I think that would continue to be a part of how we solve this from our foundation side. For example, this past year we have addressed 24 special needs schools with SIMs, six months of free data for the students, 50 per cent discounts for the teachers, 10 additional special needs schools, 18 mainstream schools, another 15 schools where we are donating devices and services to individual students. So, yes, CSR initiatives will continue to be a part of how we help to bridge this. I appreciate today the conversations about what we can all do together to address accessibility in the rural areas. I think we have got some good ideas in between the Ministry of Public Administration and Digital Transformation, TATT and us as an industry, we can accomplish that, and as well as resolving affordability. So I welcome the continued work together, and thank you for this session today.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you, and while we are at it also, while we are seeking to serve children with

disabilities and children with special needs, I know you are all innovative companies. Just bear in mind the importance for assistive technologies. I know you are technology driven, and providing those assistive technologies and innovative technologies to students with special needs to provide a different kind of support. So sometimes it is not only access, but a different type of accessibility they need to provide for their needs.

**Mr. Smith:** I will take that as a personal action on me, Sir.

**Mr. Chairman:** I appreciate that very much. Thank you very much, Mr. Smith. Ms. Agard, CEO, acting, of TSTT.

**Ms. Agard:** Thank you so very much, Chairman, for this opportunity to present to this Committee, on this very significant issue of broadband and broadband access and affordability to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. TSTT has been around for 100 years. We expect to be around for another 100 years supporting the development of our Trinidad and Tobago.

We have made significant investments over the past five, six, seven, eight years. For the past five years, we have invested over 160—I think the investment is \$1.6 billion in the roll-out and the enhancement of our ICT infrastructure, to increase and improve broadband coverage in Trinidad and Tobago, both on the mobile side and on the fixed side.

We will continue to play our part in CSR initiatives. We have many CSR initiatives that we have rolled out over the many years of our existence. I give this Committee the assurance that TSTT will continue to play a significant role in building our families, building our communities, and billing our beloved Trinidad and Tobago. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you so much, and just as we say, keep in mind that your investment has not gone unappreciated, unnoticed. It is really an investment in your next cadre of customers and base.

**Ms. Agard:** Yes, absolutely.

**Mr. Chairman:** So you are investing in yourselves and the future of the country. Thank you so much for your contribution. Mrs. Cynthia Reddock-Downes, CEO of TATT, next please.

**Ms. Reddock-Downes:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I am hoping that we are hearing a little bit better now. I am certainly grateful on behalf of the Telecoms Authority to have had this opportunity to meet and have these discussions with both members of the Committee and with service providers. I think this opportunity, what it has done for us is to identify to the members, how the people of Trinidad and Tobago feel about what gaps there are in service provision, and about the



access and affordability issues that they do have and sometimes we are not necessarily aware of.

I think for us at the Authority, we recognize that we have made significant strides over the years, from 2004 to now, but there is still some work to be done, and that work is not only about connectivity, it is also about making sure that the ICT skills of the population of Trinidad and Tobago are improved, and that we use the ICT for the purposes for which we believe they were intended, that is, to develop the country, Trinidad and Tobago, much more so as a First World country, and to also ensure that our educational ability of our students, our population, is improved considerably, by the ability to access ICT.

I think this has been a great opportunity, and I thank you very much, Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee for giving us that opportunity. Thank you.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you so much, Mrs. Reddock-Downes. Last, but by no means least, the Acting PS in Ministry of Public Administration and Digital Transformation, Mr. McKellar.

**Mr. McKellar:** Thank you, Chair. Certainly it has been a pleasure for the Ministry of Public Administration and Digital Transformation to participate in this morning's discussion, the enquiry. It has really been eye opening and enlightening, not only for, I guess, the members of the Committee, but for the national population. We have heard a lot from the different providers and TATT and the Ministry in terms of our own efforts to facilitate the educational process during the pandemic. I think there is much to celebrate but, of course, we recognize that there is still a lot to be done.

We do recognize that there are gaps. For me it was particularly eye opening hearing some of the statistics that you shared at the start of the discussion with regard to the figures in terms of the number of student hours that have been lost. We could, of course, calculate how many student hours have been lost in Trinidad and Tobago.

The Ministry of Public Administration and Digital Transformation is committed to working with all the relevant partners, in terms of ensuring that there is ubiquitous connectivity across Trinidad and Tobago. We will continue to do our part to ensure that we roll out as many access centres, push forward with the T\*TWi-Fi initiatives so that there is that connectivity, not just for students but for all citizens, because not only are we interested in human capital development from the standpoint of our students, but also in terms of our adults, persons who may need to develop their new skills, reskill, retool, because there have been job losses, and people need to identify new opportunities for economic development.

So we are committed to furthering the process and, again, we are committing to sharing any information that may come to us in terms of subsequent questions. Thank you.

**Mr. Chairman:** Thank you so much. One of the things I am hoping that comes out of this, where the Ministry of Public Administration and Digital Transformation is—is that there is a closer working relationship between the MPs, because certainly the three MPs that there are on the Committee, including MP Beckles and MP Forde, and MP Indarsingh, is that their communities have been crying out, because segments of their communities are underserved. So I am glad that all the stakeholders were able to hear firsthand from the MPs who interface with their constituents and burgesses on a daily and weekly basis, what their needs and what the gaps are.

We would like to thank you all for being with us. We really appreciate your contributions. You are the last group we are meeting with, because while we were doing the interfaces with the three groups before, these were the constant things that were popping up. One of the United Nations' papers coming out of the global pandemic states that while gaps have been identified, because the pandemic has forced the world to go online so quickly, it provides an opportunity for a destratification of services and, in particular, educational stratification, that we have complained about in Trinidad and Tobago, where the prestige schools versus the government schools, and the gaps between.

We have an opportunity here to equal the playing field if we identify the issues and collaborate to confront them, to provide an equal playing field, and an equitable environment for all learners in Trinidad and Tobago, because that is the goal of this Committee, to ensure that all students, no matter where they come from, no matter what background they come from, no matter what their personal home resources are, are provided with an equal playing field for their potential to be developed. That is why we thought as stakeholders in the digital realm, you are in a position, you are all in a position to facilitate that.

So we thank you for what you are doing now, because we do not underestimate or under appreciate what you are doing now, but we certainly have put on the table where the gaps are and where we can proffer improvements.

On behalf of the entire Committee, we would like to once again thank you for being here and for your contributions. To our listening and viewing audience, we thank you for being here. On behalf of the Committee, we wish you a safe day and a productive day. Thank you so much.

**Officials:** Thank you.

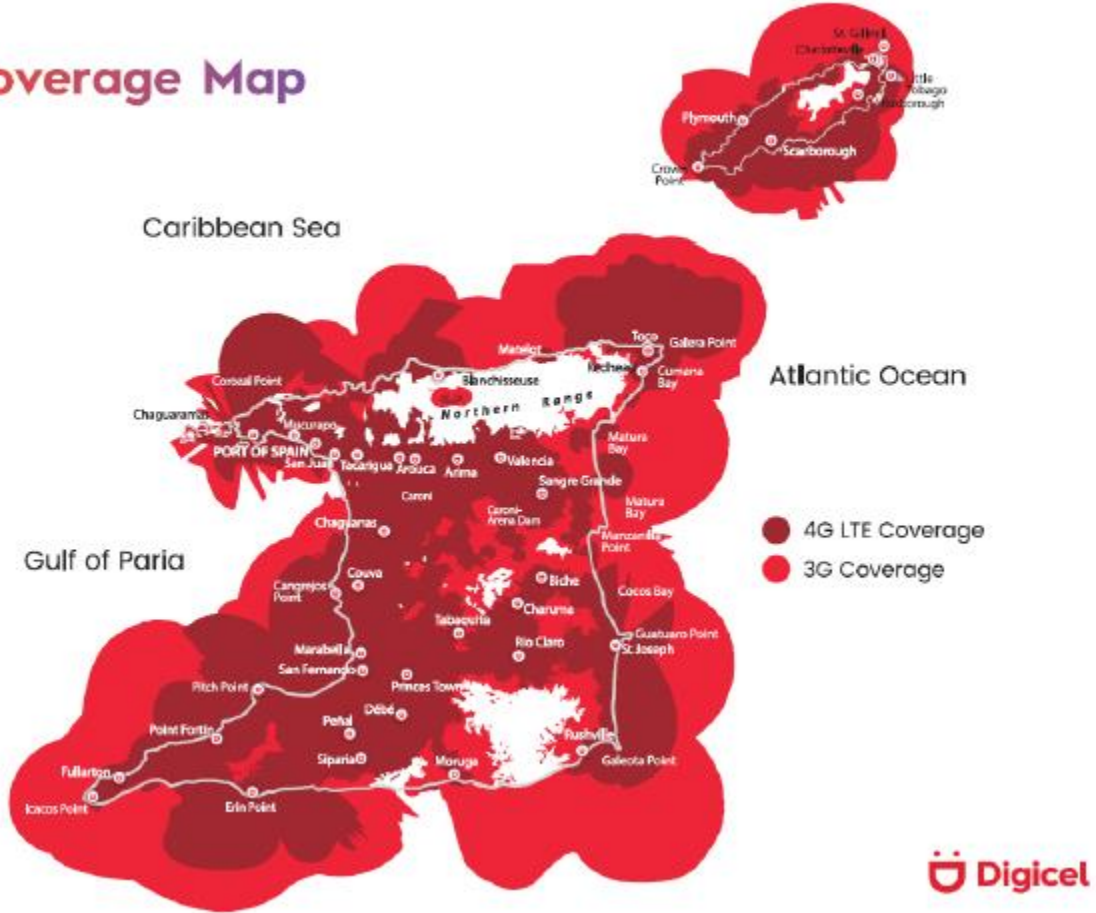
**Mr. Chairman:** The Committee is now adjourned.

**12.32 p.m.:** *Meeting adjourned.*

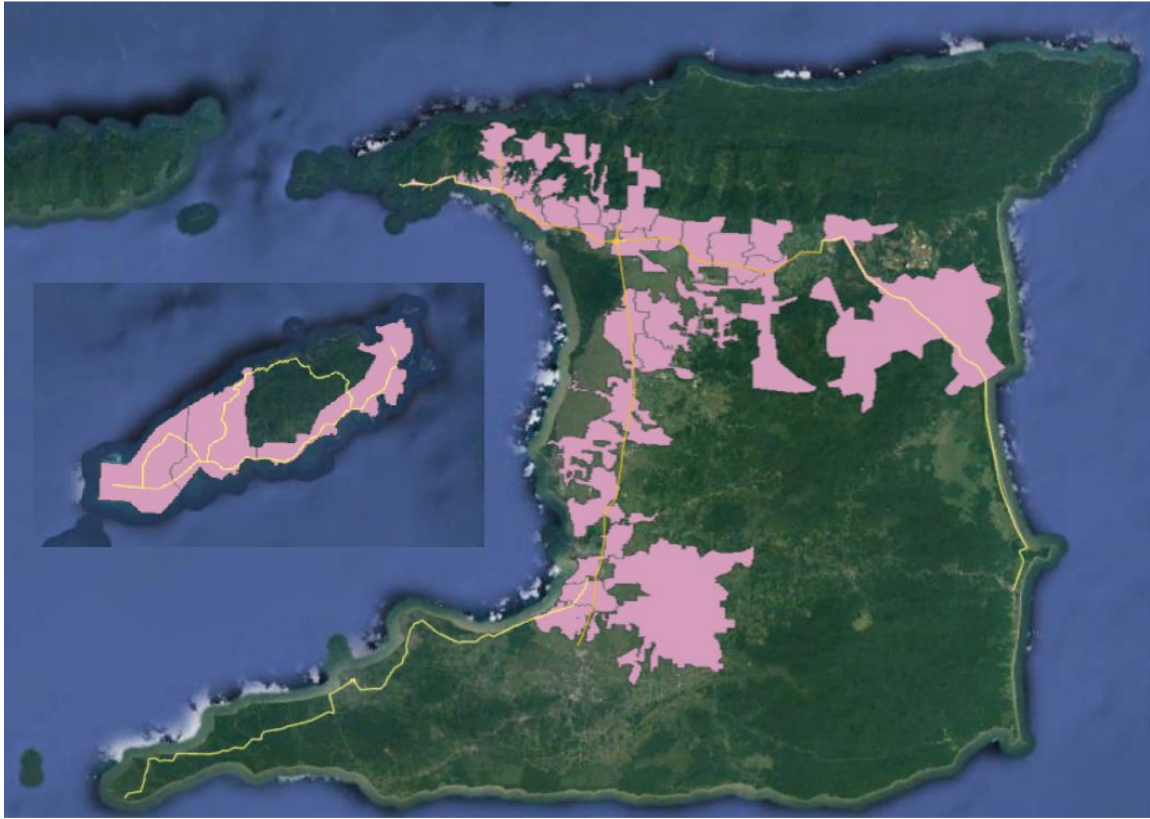
## Appendix IV – Internet Coverage Maps

### LTE National Coverage Map

#### Coverage Map



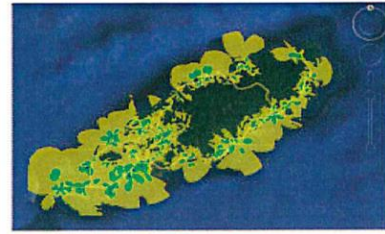
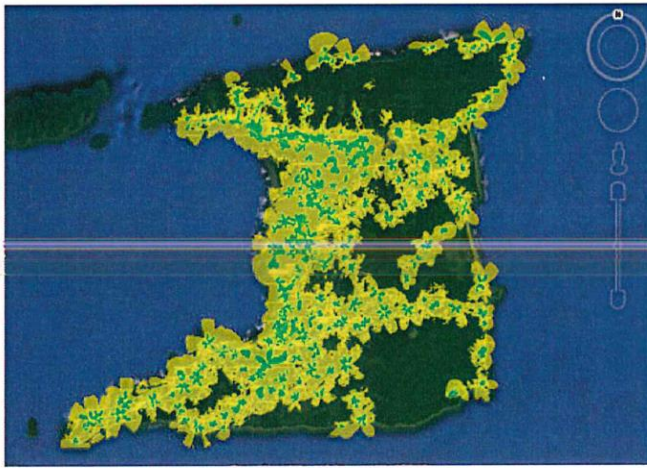
### Fibre to the Home National Coverage Map



### Existing 3G UMTS (850/1900) MHz Coverage Prediction

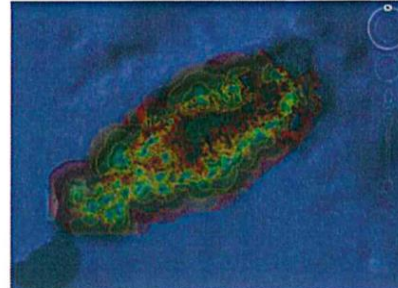
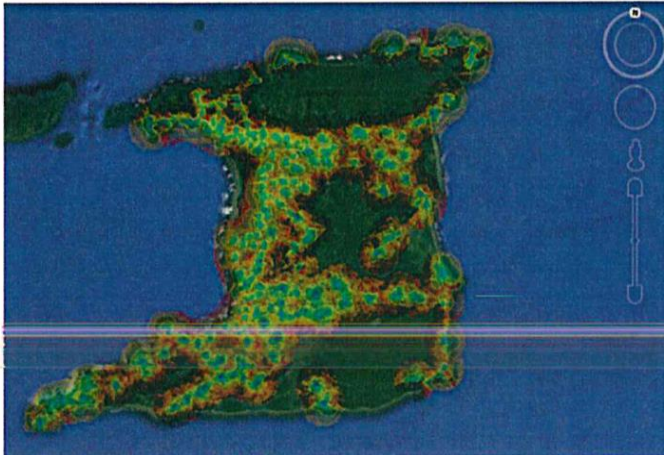


WTTx Existing Coverage of Trinidad and Tobago- 2021



Key	Legend	Levels
Green	Excellent	-85<DL RSRP(dBm)<=0
Yellow	Very Good	-100<DL RSRP(dBm)<=-85
Orange	Good	-115<DL RSRP(dBm)<=-100

Existing 4G FDD LTE 1900/700 MHz Coverage Prediction



Green	Excellent
Yellow	Very Good
Orange	Good

Min Value	Legend	Max Value
-75	-75<DL RSRP(dBm)<=0	0
-85	-85<DL RSRP(dBm)<=-75	-75
-95	-95<DL RSRP(dBm)<=-85	-85
-105	-105<DL RSRP(dBm)<=-95	-95
-115	-115<DL RSRP(dBm)<=-105	-105
-125	-125<DL RSRP(dBm)<=-115	-115

Note: Generally, all population areas have good coverage but there are small pockets of low/no coverage in some areas.