



7th Report

JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE ON

SOCIAL SERVICES

AND

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

An examination of the state of the regulation and administration of public and private early childhood institutions in Trinidad and Tobago

FOURTH SESSION (2023/2024) 12TH PARLIAMENT
OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

7TH REPORT

OF THE

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

ON

**AN EXAMINATION OF THE REGULATION AND ADMINISTRATION OF
PUBLIC AND PRIVATE EARLY CHILDHOOD INSTITUTIONS IN TRINI-
DAD AND TOBAGO.**

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The Joint Select Committee on Social Services and Public Administration

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Mr. Avinash Singh
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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. Dr. Paul Richards | Chairman |
| 2. Mr. Roger Monroe, MP | Vice-Chairman |
| 3. Mr. Esmond Forde, MP | Member |
| 4. Ms. Vandana Mohit, MP | Member |
| 5. Mr. Rohan Sinanan | Member |

| | |
|-------------------------|--------|
| 6. Ms. Penelope Beckles | Member |
| 7. Mr. David Nakhid | Member |
| 8. Mr. Avinash Singh | Member |

Change in Membership

1.1.6. The following changes were made to the Committee:

- (i) Mr. Avinash Singh was appointed a Member of the Committee in lieu of Ms. Allyson West with effect from January 12th, 2022.
- (ii) Ms. Vandana Mohit, MP was appointed a Member of the Committee in lieu of Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh, MP with effect from November 12th, 2021.

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. Rochelle Stafford | - | Parliamentary Research Specialist |

ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|-------------|--|
| ECCE | Early Childhood Care and Education |
| CATT | Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago |
| MoE | Ministry of Education |
| MoH | Ministry of Health |
| NIEER | National Institute for Early Education Research |
| MTS | The National Maintenance, Training and Security Company Limited |
| THA-DERTech | Tobago House of Assembly- Division of Education, Research and Technology |

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2.1.1. At its 16th meeting held on March 15th 2023, the Committee resolved to inquire into the regulation and administration of public and private early childhood institutions in Trinidad and Tobago:

1. **To assess the regulatory framework that governs the Early Childhood Care and Education institutions in Trinidad and Tobago;**
2. **To assess the performance of ECCE Centres for the period 2017-2022, inclusive of systems implemented to combat learning loss experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic;**
3. **To assess the health and safety compliance of ECCE Centres; and**
4. **To assess the ECCE curriculum in relation to preparation of children for primary school.**

2.1.2. The Committee acquired both oral and written evidence based on the objectives listed above. Oral evidence was received during two (2) public hearing held with various stakeholders (*See Appendix I and II*) on March 15, 2022 and June 21, 2023. The Committee also conducted site visits to various Government assisted and private ECCE centres in Trinidad. Additionally, a survey of ECCE centres was conducted from a sample of ECCE centres. A summary of the survey findings is provided in this report. Further details of the survey and site visits can be found at **Appendix III and Appendix IV respectively.**

2.1.3. Some of the significant issues highlighted during the inquiry were:

- i. Uncertainty, ambivalence or unawareness of the requirements for registration;
- ii. Lengthy registration process, compounded by the approvals of multiple government agencies;

- iii. Frustration with having to re-register for changes at the original registered ECCE Centre;
- iv. An increase of students entering schools with psycho-educational and developmental challenges;
- v. Resource limitations within the Ministry of Education regarding screening and diagnosis of disabilities among ECCE students;
- vi. The inadequate amount of resources and services available to support ECCE students with special needs;
- vii. Concerns about varying levels of student readiness for the first-year infants primary school level;
- viii. Options for the formal assessment and tracing of student performance at the ECCE level;
- ix. Demotivation among ECCE teachers serving in Government Schools due to the practice of having to interview for their current positions once their contract term has ended; and
- x. Limited financial and resource support at private ECCE centres especially post the Covid-19 Pandemic.

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

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

OBJECTIVE 1: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

A. In its Ministerial Response, the Ministry of Education should inform the Committee of the status of the following:

- **Amendment to the Education Act;**
- **The policy commitments as outlined in the Education Policy White Paper 2017-2022¹.**

B. It is recommended that the Office of the Prime Minister (Gender and Child Affairs) work with urgency to implement the necessary institutional arrangements to facilitate the proclamation of Part V of the Children’s Community Residences for Foster Care and Nurseries Act Chap 46:04 (which addresses regulation of Nurseries). This is an essential step in strengthening the overall regulatory framework for ECCE, as it would allow for the proper involvement of the Children’s Authority of Trinidad and Tobago (CATT) in the monitoring and enforcement regime.

C. In their response to the Committee, the Office of the Prime Minister (Gender and Child Affairs) should provide the status of the Draft Nurseries Regulations.

D. The Committee acknowledges the Ministry of Education’s efforts to taking steps toward addressing unregistered ECCE centres. It is recommended that the Ministry consider conducting a nationwide data collection drive to gather updated information on all ECCE centres, with specific emphasis on private ECCE centres. In its Ministerial Response, the MOE is asked to indicate the feasibility of

¹ The specific policy commitments include 1. The development of a qualifications framework, 2. The Development of a quality assurance framework, 3. The conducting or commissioning of research on the aspects of the quality of services that are most critical to child development in order to inform ECCE policy, 4. Developing and Implementing a quality assurance framework for measuring, monitoring and evaluating quality at the ECCE level.

completing such a data gathering exercise by August 2024. To ensure that the most updated information is presented, it is recommended that once created, the database should be updated on a quarterly or a biannual basis.

- E. Over the course of the next 6 months, it is recommended that the Ministry of Education relaunch its' information sensitization drive on the registration process as well as the importance of registration. The informational/sensitization drive can be hosted on the Ministry of Education's social media platforms and website. The steps/stages for registering and means of obtaining assistance should be clearly articulated.
- F. Further to the previous recommendation that the Ministry of Education, in keeping with the Government's digital transformation strategy, should facilitate aspects of the registration, process online. This may entail applicants uploading their relevant documentation on a website and having the capability of tracking the progress of their application. The Ministry of Education can consider sending field officers to assist with the registration of schools in rural areas.
- G. While there has been some movement towards integrating migrant children into the local education system, it is recommended that clear legislative provisions under the Education Act and Immigration Act be included to ensure that these children have access to formal education beginning from the ECCE level. Ample consideration must be given to the relevant international treaties and conventions to which Trinidad and Tobago is a signatory.

- H. As part of the teaching requirements, it is recommended that the Ministry of Education request that teachers have basic first aid certification. Using the 1:15 ratio², it is recommended that at least one teacher have basic first aid certification per fifteen students. Teachers and administrators should also have basic training in identifying and referring children who their suspect may need diagnostic and remediation for special needs education support.
- I. While the Committee acknowledges the professional development programmes offered to ECCE teachers, it is recommended that the promotion of these offerings are improved by either frequent posts of upcoming programmes on the Ministry's social media pages or direct calls, especially to private ECCE centres, across Trinidad and Tobago.
- J. that within this fiscal year (2023/2024), the MoE should review the procedures and protocols followed in relation to the renewal of employment contracts for ECCE teachers with a view to determining whether there are any aspects that are not in alignment with good HRM and industrial relations practices.
- K. within the next three months, the Ministry of Education reiterate and communicate via their social media platforms that discrimination in school entry violates basic human rights, referencing the Equal Opportunity Act³. Additionally, it is recommended that the Ministry provide clear steps for filing reports on cases of discrimination. These steps should include:
- Clear contact information for the department responsible for complaints;
 - Outline of steps that would be taken by the department;
 - Identification of possible outcomes of reporting; and
 - Duration of time before a solution is presented to the parent/guardian.

² [Early Childhood Care and Education \(ECCE\) Division – Ministry of Education \(moe.gov.tt\)](http://moe.gov.tt)

³ [Discrimination and education \(equalopportunity.gov.tt\)](http://equalopportunity.gov.tt)

OBJECTIVE 2: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

A. The Committee acknowledges the steps taken by the Ministry of Education to develop a standardized assessment tool for the ECCE level. In its Ministerial Response, the Ministry of Education should inform the Parliament of the results of the:

- a. Special Needs Assessment Profile (SNAP), which was previously piloted in 2022; and**
- b. The Draft National Child Development Assessment Instrument.**

The Ministry of Education should also identify the ECCE centres across the country where these instruments were piloted.

B. In addition to checking for infrastructural compliance, it is recommended that the Ministry of Education conduct clinical assessments on the delivery of lessons to determine the quality of teaching at various points of the academic year. It is recommended that emphasis be placed on private ECCE centres to ensure that they are keeping in line with the National Curriculum Guide and overall basic requirements for the age group.

OBJECTIVE 3: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

A. By the next six months, it is recommended that the Ministry of Education develop a definite and standardized risk management/assessment prioritization rubric for the inspection of schools.

B. In terms of the challenges to comply with Health and safety requirements (which generally stem from the inability to finance the required infrastructural improvements), it is recommended that the Ministry of Education provide technical support in collaboration with MTS and the Occupational and Health Agency (OSHA) to registered private institutions.

- C. The response of the MoE should include an overview of the proposed strategy of the Ministry for encouraging private ECCE schools to participate in the proposed three-year moratorium.
- D. The Committee endorses the recommendations made by MTS regarding the placement of two officers at the ECCE centres nationwide. This placement should be based on security and surveillance best practices as well as general Risk Assessments of ECCE centres to determine which schools should be assigned additional officers.
- E. In their Ministerial Response, the Ministry of Education should indicate the amount paid to MTS since the commencement of the new fiscal year 2023/2024 and the value of outstanding payments owed to the MTS to date.
- F. The MoE should consider collaborating with the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs to develop a “flagging system” as part of its revision of the registration process. This system would promptly notify the Ministry of Education when the Ministry of Legal Affairs registers an early childhood centre as a business. Such a system aims to facilitate proper inspection processes for schools and prevent them from operating without completing the entire registration process.
- G. Within three months of the presentation of this report, the procedure for reporting complaints concerning poor health and safety arrangements in ECCE centres should be prominently published on the Ministry of Education’s website and social media pages.

OBJECTIVE 4: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

- A. As part of its Ministerial response, the Ministry of Education should provide an update on the following:**
- **National Child Development Assessment Instrument as well as the revision of the National Curriculum Guide for ECCE.**
 - **The outcome of the consultation with the OJT department to provide aids for students.**
 - **An update on the status of on the revised National Curriculum Guide**
- B. The Committee acknowledges the point made by the Division of Education, Research and Technology (DERTech) that there should be a standardized framework or syllabus to be used across all ECCE sectors. The Committee accepts the recommendation made by DERTech that the curriculum needs to be upgraded accordingly.**
- C. There is need to increase the number teachers trained in special needs education to meet the growing needs of students in the ECCE sector.**
- D. Considering the provision of student aides, the Ministry of Education can also consider developing a partnership with UTT to allow final year Special Needs educators to work at various ECCE centres as part of a paid internship in addition to sourcing student aides via the OJT programme.**
- E. It is recommended that the Ministry of Education establish strategic partnerships with private educational and developmental psychologists. This collaboration can take the form of a “support a child” programme where the corporate community is encouraged to sponsor the psycho-social assessment, remediation and support of a special needs child. This collaboration aims to address the increasing demand for comprehensive assessments and intervention plans catering to children at the ECCE level.**

INTRODUCTION

3.1.1 According to UNICEF, the Early Childhood phase can be divided into three periods as outlined below:

- Conception to birth;
- Birth to 3 years; and
- Pre-school and pre-primary years (3 years to 5 or 6 years, or the age of school entry)⁴.

3.1.2 Having access to Early Childhood Education has been identified as one of the pillars of predicting a child’s future educational success. Children are also exposed to key social skills such as sharing, taking turns and following instructions.

3.1.3 According to the UN’s Sustainable Developmental Goals, target 4.2 of Goal number 4 refers specifically to Early Childhood Education and states that “by 2030, all girls and boys (should) have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education.”⁵

3.1.4 According to a 2019 UNICEF report, in most countries, the expansion of early childhood education has been slow and uneven. In high-income countries, 83 per cent of children are enrolled in pre-primary education compared to only 22 per cent from low-income countries. Of the 31 countries with the lowest pre-primary enrolment rates, 29 are low- or lower-middle-income countries. These

^{4 4} United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), UNICEF’s Programme Guidance for Early Childhood Development, August 2017. Accessed online via <https://www.unicef.org/media/107616/file/UNICEF-Programme-%20Guidance-for-Early-Childhood-Development-2017.pdf>

⁵ Ibid

gaps in access to pre-primary education are significant and have distressing implications for child development and educational outcomes.⁶”

3.1.5 Specifically to the Caribbean region, it was found that 25 percent of the Region’s children, mainly those from poor and vulnerable families, do not have access to early childhood education programs during critical developmental years⁷.

3.1.6 There has been a series of collaborations and trainings with the aim of increasing and improving the level of early childhood care and education. For example, the Caribbean Development Bank in collaboration with UNICEF partnered to produce the Caribbean Early Childhood Development Good Practice Guide, which launched officially during the opening ceremony of the Early Childhood Development Regional Research Conference in 2018⁸. Additionally, a series of workshops have been conducted by CARICOM, UNESCO and UWI Open Campus with the aim of building regional capacity among early childhood educators to expand access to and delivery of high quality early childhood education via distance learning⁹.

3.1.7 In Trinidad and Tobago there are presently one hundred and forty three (143) government-assisted ECCE centres, fifty-seven (57) Servol centres, twelve (12) centres in Tobago, and approximately six hundred and thirty one (631) private centres¹⁰.”

⁶ <https://data.unicef.org/resources/a-world-ready-to-learn-report/>

⁷ <https://today.caricom.org/2018/02/15/cdb-unicef-partner-to-improve-quality-of-early-childhood-education-in-the-caribbean/>

⁸ ibid

⁹ <https://caricom.org/early-childhood-educators-access-training-in-distance-learning-through-caricom-unesco-uwi-open-campus-collaboration/>

¹⁰ <https://newsday.co.tt/2023/06/29/ecce-centres-have-three-years-to-register-under-moe-new-policy/>

3.1.8 Although it was recommended in a 2003 report that for the early childhood sector to be a legitimate part of the local public education system, **the sector remains unregulated to date**¹¹. Additionally, while the Education Act mentions the early childhood level, **it does not hold service providers accountable for the provision of quality ECCE services.**

3.1.9 In light of the expansion of the ECCE sector in Trinidad and Tobago, there is concern about compliance to the Ministry of Educations' regulations as well as the overall quality of the education and training being delivered. **This inquiry seeks to examine the regulation and administration of public and private early childhood institutions in Trinidad and Tobago.**

¹¹ <https://www.moe.gov.tt/policy-documents/>

Conduct of the Inquiry

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

- 1. To assess the regulatory framework that governs the Early Childhood Care and Education institutions in Trinidad and Tobago;**
- 2. To assess the performance of ECCE Centres for the period 2017-2022, inclusive of systems implemented to combat learning loss experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic;**
- 3. To assess the health and safety compliance of ECCE Centres; and**
- 4. To assess the ECCE curriculum in relation to preparation of children for primary school.**

3.1.11 Evidence gathering for this inquiry included **two (2) public hearings** held with the stakeholders listed below on **March 14, 2023 and June 21, 2023**. Site visits were conducted to various ECCE on **Wednesday 19, April 2023 and Monday 01, May 2023**. Finally, a survey of ECCE centres was done with a sample of ECCE schools provided by the Ministry of Education.

Public Hearings and stakeholders who appeared

March 15, 2023

- Ministry of Education
- Children’s Authority of Trinidad and Tobago
- Tobago House of Assembly, Division of Education, Research and Technology (DERTech)

June 21, 2023

- Ministry of Education (MoE)
- Ministry of Health (MoH)
- Tobago House of Assembly- Division of Education, Research and Technology (DERTech)
- The National Maintenance Training and Security Company Limited (MTS)

Site Visits

April 19, 2023

- Holy Rosary Preparatory School
- Rainbow Munchkins Pre-School
- Ramdial's Pre-School
- Nur-E-Islam ECCE Centre

May 01, 2023

- Maharaj Pre-School
- La Romaine Government ECCE
- Revival Tabernacle Kindergarten
- Lenore's Kindergarten

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

3.1.13 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.

3.1.11. The **Minutes of the Meetings** during which the public hearings were held are attached as **Appendix I and II** and the **Verbatim Notes** as **Appendix IV and V**.

KEY ISSUES, FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

OBJECTIVE 1: To assess the regulatory framework that governs the Early Childhood Care and Education institutions in Trinidad and Tobago

General Information about ECCE Centres.

3.1.14 According to the Ministry of Education, as of January 23, 2023 there were six hundred and fifty-four (654) registered ECCE centres;

3.1.15 Based on a data collection drive carried out in 2018/2019, there were approximately one hundred and seventy-seven (177) unregulated/unregistered ECCE centres in Trinidad and Tobago;

3.1.16 The Ministry stated that of the one hundred and forty-three (143) public ECCE centres, forty-three (42) are managed by denominational boards and one (1) is managed by a community board – The Cotton Tree Foundation;

Table 1: Number of ECCE Centres managed by Denominational Boards

| | |
|---|---|
| Anglican | 5 |
| Anjuman Sunnat ul Jamaat Association (ASJA) | 4 |
| Baptist Union | 1 |
| Mennonite | 1 |
| Pentecostal | 2 |
| Presbyterian | 2 |

| | |
|--|---|
| Roman Catholic | 4 |
| Sathya Sai Organization | 4 |
| Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) | 3 |
| Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha (SDMS) | 8 |
| Spiritual Shouter Baptist | 1 |
| SWAHA | 4 |
| Tackveeyatul Islamic Association (TIA) | 1 |
| Trinidad Muslim League (TML) | 1 |
| Vedic (APS) | 1 |

3.1.17 The age requirement for entering an Early Childhood Centre ranges between three (3) and five (5). It was reported by the Ministry of Education (MoE) that there were no restrictions for mixing different age groups;

3.1.18 According to the MoE, for the academic year 2022/2023 there was a total of **seven thousand, six hundred and seventy-eight children enrolled in Government and Government-assisted ECCE centres five thousand nine hundred and six (5,906) and one thousand, seven hundred and seventy-two in SERVOL ECCE centres.**

3.1.19 It was reported that for the academic year 2018/2019, there were seventeen thousand, seven hundred and fifty-eight (17,758) children enrolled in private ECCE centres in Trinidad.

3.1.20 The THA-DERTech reported that there are small numbers of government, government assisted and SERVOL centres in Tobago compared to private ECCE

centres. Considering this, it was stated that some government/government assisted schools might be over-capacity. It was further explained that current capacity would be approximately three hundred and ninety-five (395) to four hundred (400) and they are currently at approximately four hundred and forty (440).

3.1.21 Despite the government and government assisted centres being over-capacity, the THA-DERTech stated that they are fully staffed at every centre and are running interviews to fill any gaps identified.

3.1.22 There is no standardization of school fees at the private ECCE centres.

3.1.23 Many of the privately operated ECCE centres were not visited by education Ministry officials to ensure registration and compliance in keeping with the Education Act.

Legislative and Policy Framework

4.1.1 The Ministry of Education stated that the ECCE sector is not specifically addressed in the Education Act but it is governed by the relevant provisions of the Act as well as other related legislation such as the Children's Act and the Occupational Safety and Health Act and other policy documents such as:

- **The National Policy on Standards for Regulating Early Childhood Services in Trinidad and Tobago¹²;**
- **The National ECCE Curriculum Guide¹³; and**
- **The Ministry of Education's Policy for the Registration of Private Schools in Trinidad and Tobago¹⁴.**

¹² <http://40.71.102.248/regulating-early-childhood-services/>

¹³ <https://storage.moe.gov.tt/corporate/2022/09/NATIONAL-CURRICULUM-GUIDE.pdf>

¹⁴ <https://storage.moe.gov.tt/wpdevelopment/2023/09/Policy-for-the-Registration-of-Private-Schools-in-Trinidad-Tobago.pdf>

- 4.1.2 The policy on the registration of private schools in Trinidad and Tobago was approved by Cabinet in early June 2023. The policy outlines the registration procedure as well as additional requirements including location details, curriculum details, timetables, layout of the school and details on how student performance will be evaluated.
- 4.1.3 Another key aspect of the policy included the strengthening of the monitoring and evaluation unit of the ECCE Division.
- 4.1.4 Private ECCE centres are mandated to be registered in keeping with the Education Act.
- 4.1.5 The Ministry of Education stated that based on the new Education Policy that was approved by Cabinet in June 2023¹⁵, a moratorium of three (3) years is to be granted to unregistered schools to ensure that they become compliant.
- 4.1.6 The moratorium came into effect on June 1, 2023 and will end on May 31, 2026.
- 4.1.7 The Ministry of Education stated that notice of the moratorium have been posted on the Ministry's Website as well as their social media pages. The Ministry also indicated that they have hosted virtual Town Hall sessions with private providers during the period October 10 -12, 2023 and a follow-up meeting held on January 31, 2024. These sessions were uploaded to the Ministry's website and social media pages. Finally, it was reported that queries from providers will be addressed through a dedicated Ministry email: privateschool.registration@moe.gov.tt.
- 4.1.8 It was also stated that under this approved policy, schools could be deregistered if they are found to be deficient and not compliant.

¹⁵ <https://newsday.co.tt/2023/06/29/ecce-centres-have-three-years-to-register-under-moe-new-policy/>

- 4.1.9 The Chief Parliamentary Counsel, with support from the Legal Unit of the MoE is in the process of amending the Education Act, which will include the ECCE sector. It is expected that the finalization of this document will be completed by the end of 2023.
- 4.1.10 The Ministry of Education provided an update on ECCE related policy commitments that were previously outlined in the Education Policy Paper (White Paper) 2017-2022

Table 2: Policy Commitments as outlined in the Education Policy (White Paper) 2017-2022 and its current status

| Policy Commitments | Status |
|--|--|
| A. Development of a qualifications framework ¹⁶ | Initial discussions commenced prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic the Ministry has since shifted its focus to the development of legislation which will ensure the implementation of the framework. It was reported that talks are scheduled to recommence soon. |
| B. Development of a quality assurance framework | The Ministry of Education has commenced assessment of the current standards for regulating Early Childhood Care and Education, this is currently ongoing and is separated into |

¹⁶ Table adapted from the Ministry of Education's written submission dated March 1, 2023

Table 2: Policy Commitments as outlined in the Education Policy (White Paper) 2017-2022 and its current status

| Policy Commitments | Status |
|--|---|
| | three (3) components. The curriculum, teaching and learning and assessment of children |
| C. Facilitation of the development of legislation to ensure uniformity of practices as well as governance of private centres | The Ministry is working with the Chief Parliamentary Counsel on the amendment of the Education Act. |
| D. Development of a database to collect demographic data to produce statistical indicators to inform programme standards | The Ministry stated that a database was developed following a data collection drive during 2018/2019 |
| E. Conducting or commissioning research on the aspects of the quality of services that are most critical to child development in order to inform ECCE policy | The Ministry reported that this area of research has not commenced. |
| F. Promoting the benefits of ECCE to stakeholders through improved stakeholder engagement and a publicity campaign | The Ministry stated that this is an ongoing activity via the Ministry's social media pages |
| G. Developing and instituting transition strategies to support and ensure smooth transition from ECCE Centres to primary schools | The Ministry reported hosting annual transition workshops during the third term of the school year with ECCE parents and primary school teachers. |

Table 2: Policy Commitments as outlined in the Education Policy (White Paper) 2017-2022 and its current status

| Policy Commitments | Status |
|---|---|
| | The Ministry stated that a cross-divisional team was established and comprised of personnel from the Ministry's ECCE Division, Curriculum Planning And Development Division, Student Support Services and Education District Health Services Unit |
| H. Developing and Implementing a quality assurance framework for measuring, monitoring and evaluating quality at the ECCE level | The Ministry reported initiating a study in 2017 to evaluate ECCE classrooms using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System. Results indicated on average that adequate classroom organization and emotional support levels and a need to strengthen instructional support across the system |

4.1.11 The Ministry of Education stated that it is against the law to have an institution with children without registration with the Ministry.

4.1.12 Specifically concerning entry of non-national children into local schools, it was noted that entry into schools is governed by the Immigration Act. It is stated that persons wishing to access formal education in Trinidad and Tobago must have a student permit issued by the Chief Immigration Officer¹⁷.

¹⁷ The Immigration Regulation Section 9 (6)(a) where a person seeking to enter Trinidad and Tobago falls within the category described in section 9(1) (g) of the Act, the Immigration officer shall not allow such a person to enter Trinidad and Tobago for the purpose of entering any educational or training establishment in Trinidad and Tobago

4.1.13 The Ministry of Education stated that there is currently sixteen (16) non-national children enrolled in public ECCE centres in Trinidad.

4.1.14 Specifically, pertaining to nurseries that fall under the purview of the Children's Authority, it was reported that **no date had been specified for the proclamation of Part V of the Children's Community Residences, Foster Care and Nurseries Act, Chap 46:04**¹⁸.

4.1.15 The Children's Authority stated that they do not currently monitor the operations of privately managed early childhood centres that operates both as a school (kindergarten) and a nursery.

4.1.16 It was reported that **Section 45 of the Act outlines some requirements for the licensure of nurseries.** It was further explained by the CATT that this provision is to be supplemented by Draft Nurseries Regulations which are yet to be passed and which provide for the requirement of:

- Certificates of Approval by Public Health and TT Fire Services;
- Specific staffing requirements for the Manager and employees;
- Guidelines for the appropriateness of the premises to ensure that it is:
 - a. Adequately lit;
 - b. Is ventilated;
 - c. Is suitably furnished
 - d. Is kept in good structural repair externally and internally;
 - e. Is kept clean and well maintained;
 - f. Is secure;
 - g. Is furnished with sufficient storage facilities

unless that person is in possession of a valid students permit in the form set out as Form 43. The holder of a student's permit shall comply with the terms and conditions specified in such permit. <https://agla.gov.tt/downloads/laws/18.01.pdf>

¹⁸ <https://www.ttparliament.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/The-Childrens-Community-Residences-Childrens-Homes-Regulations-2018.pdf>

Registration Process

4.1.17 In their written submission, the Ministry of Education outlined the registration process for ECCE centres:

Table 3: Steps for the Registration of an ECCE Centre as outlined by the Ministry of Education

| | |
|--------|--|
| Step 1 | Obtain form for Application for Registration of an Early Childhood Centre from ECCE Division or download from the Ministry of Education's website: www.moe.gov.tt |
| Step 2 | Written approvals/certificates from the following state agencies must be attached: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Water and Sewerage Authority (WASA) - Electrical Inspectorate (Public Utilities Commission) - Trinidad and Tobago Fire Service - Regional Health Authority - Ministry of Planning and Development, Town and Country Planning Division |
| Step 3 | Forms with relevant attachments must be submitted to the ECCE Division, inclusive of Certificate of Business Registration from the Ministry of Legal Affairs. All documents are reviewed and accepted once they contain the required information |
| Step 4 | A site visit is then conducted by personnel from the ECCE Division |
| Step 5 | After the successful completion of the site visit, the completed forms with all attachments together with an assigned registration number is then forwarded for approval by the Director of School Supervision |

(DSS). Once this is approved, a Certificate of Registration is generated.

- 4.1.18 According to the Ministry of Education, there are no size or location requirements to open an ECCE centre, but approvals must be obtained from the relevant State Agencies.
- 4.1.19 During the 17th Public Hearing of the Joint Select Committee on Social Services and Public Administration (JSCSSPA) held on March 15th 2023, officials of the MoE stated that the schools that pose the greatest risks are the unregistered private institutions.
- 4.1.20 The Ministry of Education stated that if a private ECCE centre wishes to become a government-assisted school, they might have to be aligned with a denominational board. The Ministry further explained that an application must be submitted once the school falls under any one of the twenty-one denominational boards and consideration would be given. Finally, it was stated that there would be the signing of a memorandum of understanding between both parties (the individual/denominational body) and the Ministry of Education as to the responsibilities of the Ministry.
- 4.1.21 In terms of registration of schools in Tobago, the THA-DERTech was unable to provide a precise timeframe for the registration process to be concludes particularly since approval forms must be sent to the MoE in Trinidad. However, the Division reported that generally time it takes to become registered in Tobago was seen as a deterrent to pursuing registration.
- 4.1.22 It was reported that a previous public call for schools to register by the THA-DERTech was poorly received and only garnered a few responses.

4.1.23 Despite having a delay in receiving updated data, the THA-DERTech estimates approximately one hundred and twenty-three (123) ECCE centres are not registered.

Teaching staff at ECCE centres

4.1.24 The Ministry of Education reported that there were currently **four hundred and thirty-five (435)** teaching staff members assigned to Government and Government assisted ECCE centres. Furthermore, one hundred and seventy-nine (179) teaching staff members assigned at the SERVOL-managed ECCE centres.

4.1.25 In terms of hiring at the Government and Government assisted ECCE centres, the Ministry of Education stated that competency-based interviews are conducted by a panel of subject matter specialists and human resource professionals. Finally, successful candidates are placed on an Order of Merit Listing.

4.1.26 Considering professional development, the Ministry of Education stated that training is ongoing and open to all providers (not only members of staff at government or government-assisted centres. The Ministry stated that there is a teacher development unit and continuous professional development sessions are offered.

4.1.27 The Ministry of Education does not play a role in the screening or hiring processes at private institutions. It was stated that private institutions were responsible for the recruitment processes of their organizations.

4.1.28 The Ministry noted however, that in order to become a registered institution, persons must meet the required qualification standards. Persons must have a certificate in early childhood care and education from an accredited tertiary institution.

4.1.29 The Committee learnt that the Ministry does not require first aid certifications from persons for registration.

4.1.30 In the recently approved Policy on Registration of Private Schools in Trinidad and Tobago, it was stated that teachers would also be part of a three-year moratorium in order to obtain the necessary qualifications to ensure they are compliant with all requirements.

4.1.31 It was learnt that there is some frustration and dissatisfaction among ECCE teachers, as they had to reapply or continuously seek reemployment for the same positions they currently held. The Ministry of Education stated that contract positions are guided by guidelines provided by the Chief Personnel Officer.

Findings

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

- i. The Ministry of Education was in the process of completing the Education Policy 2023-2027 that outlined more tailored strategic objectives and policy directions for the ECCE sector¹⁹.
- ii. The Ministry of Education was also in the process of finalizing the Policy for the Registration of Private Schools in Trinidad and Tobago, inclusive of ECCE centres²⁰. However, it was noted that the necessary amendments to the Education Act that would provide a more definite legal standing on this matter is pending.
- iii. Despite a few challenges in terms of the registration process, it was generally found that the registration process for ECCE centres was not difficult in Trinidad.

¹⁹ [Education-Policy-2023-2027.pdf \(moe.gov.tt\)](#)

²⁰ [Policy-for-the-Registration-of-Private-Schools-in-Trinidad-Tobago.pdf \(moe.gov.tt\)](#)

- iv. Any changes in a schools' operations that have been previously registered, require the school to re-register. In some instances, it was noted that certain changes in the operations of a school, such as the changes in the address or name, were not reported to the MoE. This ultimately led to discrepancies in the MoE's records. In fact, during a site visit, the Committee had a first-hand experience of a scenario where Ministry officials were unaware of a change of address of a privately operated institution.
- v. Additionally, it was found that some private ECCE schools experienced challenges with registering, as some did not have the resources to become compliant with the commensurate statutory requirements, in addition to many private operators not even being aware of the need to register their centre.
- vi. Some of the challenges identified regarding the registration process included the lengthy process of registering, difficulty accessing the services of other state agencies who are involved in the registration process and inadequate assistance from the Ministry of Education.
- vii. To get information about private unregistered institutions, the Ministry of Education relied on reports from within the community.
- viii. Officials at the Ministry of Education stated that major reported infractions were very low. They reported that at the last academic year, there were only two incidents recorded from unregistered private ECCE centres.
- ix. There appears to be a discrepancy between the support provided to private ECCE centres and what is actually received. While the Ministry of Education stated that they will provide and have provided technical support to ECCE centres, some private schools stated they had not been visited by the Ministry of Education for many years.

- x. While the requirements for registration were similar in Tobago, it was found that all documentation must come to Trinidad for approval, which, in some cases lengthens the process of registration.
- xi. It was noted that non-national children have been enrolled at some ECCE schools specifically at two schools observed during the site visit. While there was a language barrier in some cases, the teachers on duty advised the Committees that the children were supported and have integrated into the classroom.
- xii. It was reported that although under the Constitution of Trinidad and Tobago²¹, all children regardless of nationality have the right to an education; the lack of clear legislative provisions under the Immigration Act can prevent persons from being allowed to enter formal educational establishments²².
- xiii. The committee was made aware of challenges enrolling students into primary schools due to zoning. It was mentioned during a site visit at an ECCE center that some students were denied registration at certain schools due to zoning.
- xiv. It was explained that because of legislative shortcomings and the fact that standards are not ratified by law, the THA-DERTech does not have any power or authority to control private ECCE centres, nor demand any information from them. The lack of legislative power emboldens some private institutions to operate as they see fit.
- xv. It was noted that parents might choose private schools because the demand for Government ECCE centres in Tobago significantly exceeds supply.

²¹ Section 4, *It is hereby recognised and declared that in Trinidad and Tobago there have existed and shall continue to exist, without discrimination by reason of race, origin, colour, religion or sex, the following fundamental human rights and freedoms, namely: (f) the right of a parent or guardian to provide a school of his own choice for the education of his child or ward*

²² [lwc upr39 tto e main.pdf \(upr-info.org\)](#)

- xvi. Despite the Ministry of Education stating that site visits are conducted, the Committee questioned the frequency of these visits, since some schools stated that they had not been visited by the Ministry for several years.
- xvii. The MoE was unable to determine the percentage of private schools that accessed their trainings. Additionally, a few private ECCE operators admitted to not being fully aware of the suite of professional development trainings offered by the ministry of education.
- xviii. Several government administered and private centres lamented the lack of special needs instructors and support systems. In some cases, it was reported that parents and instructors were given contradictory information and guidance regarding remediation for their children with special needs and their families.
- xix. It was mentioned during the site visit that teachers are requested to reapply for their current positions as their contract comes to an end despite having worked in that position for several years.

Recommendations

Considering the foregoing, the Committee recommends the following:

A. In its Ministerial Response, the Ministry of Education should inform the Committee of the status of the following:

- **Amendment to the Education Act; and**
- **The policy commitments as outlined in the Education Policy White Paper 2017-2022²³.**

²³ The specific policy commitments include 1. The development of a qualifications framework, 2. The Development of a quality assurance framework, 3. The conducting or commissioning of research on the aspects of the quality of services that are most critical to child development in order to inform ECCE policy, 4. Developing and Implementing a quality assurance framework for measuring, monitoring and evaluating quality at the ECCE level.

- B. It is recommended that the Office of the Prime Minister (Gender and Child Affairs) work with urgency to implement the necessary institutional arrangements to facilitate the proclamation of Part V of the Children’s Community Residences for Foster Care and Nurseries Act Chap 46:04 (which addresses regulation of Nurseries). This is an essential step in strengthening the overall regulatory framework for ECCE, as it would allow for the proper involvement of the Children’s Authority of Trinidad and Tobago (CATT) in the monitoring and enforcement regime.**
- C. In their response to the Committee, the Office of the Prime Minister (Gender and Child Affairs) should provide the status of the Draft Nurseries Regulations.**
- D. The Committee acknowledges the Ministry of Education’s efforts to taking steps toward addressing unregistered ECCE centres. It is recommended that the Ministry give consideration to conducting a nationwide data collection drive to gather updated information on all ECCE centres, with specific emphasis on private ECCE centres. In its Ministerial Response, the MOE is asked to indicate the feasibility of completing such a data gathering exercise by August 2024. To ensure that the most updated information is presented, it is recommended that once created, the database should be updated on a quarterly or a biannual basis.**
- E. Over the course of the next 6 months, it is recommended that the Ministry of Education relaunch its’ information sensitization drive on the registration process as well as the importance of registration. The informational/sensitization drive can be hosted on the Ministry of Education’s social media platforms and website. The steps/stages for registering and means of obtaining assistance should be clearly articulated.**

- F. Further to the previous recommendation that the Ministry of Education, in keeping with the Government's digital transformation strategy, should facilitate aspects of the registration, process online. This may entail applicants uploading their relevant documentation on a website and having the capability of tracking the progress of their application. The Ministry of Education can consider sending field officers to assist with the registration of schools in rural areas.
- G. While there has been some movement towards integrating migrant children into the local education system, it is recommended that clear legislative provisions under the Education Act and Immigration Act be included to ensure that these children have access to formal education beginning from the ECCE level. Ample consideration must be given to the relevant international treaties and conventions to which Trinidad and Tobago is a signatory.
- H. As part of the teaching requirements, it is recommended that the Ministry of Education request that teachers have basic first aid certification. Using the 1:15 ratio²⁴, it is recommended that at least one teacher have basic first aid certification per fifteen students. Teachers and administrators should also have basic training in identifying and referring children who their suspect may need diagnostic and remediation for special needs education support.
- I. While the Committee acknowledges the professional development programmes offered to ECCE teachers, it is recommended that the promotion of these offerings are improved by either frequent posts of upcoming programmes on the Ministry's social media pages or direct calls, especially to private ECCE centres, across Trinidad and Tobago.

²⁴ [Early Childhood Care and Education \(ECCE\) Division – Ministry of Education \(moe.gov.tt\)](http://moe.gov.tt)

- J. that within this fiscal year (2023/2024), the MoE should review the procedures and protocols followed in relation to the renewal of employment contracts for ECCE teachers with a view to determining whether there are any aspects that are not in alignment with good HRM and industrial relations practices.**
- K. within the next three months, the Ministry of Education reiterate and communicate via their social media platforms that discrimination in school entry violates basic human rights, referencing the Equal Opportunity Act²⁵. Additionally, it is recommended that the Ministry provide clear steps for filing reports on cases of discrimination. These steps should include:**
- **Clear contact information for the department responsible for complaints;**
 - **Outline of steps that would be taken by the department;**
 - **Identification of possible outcomes of reporting; and**
 - **Duration of time before a solution is presented to the parent/guardian.**

²⁵ [Discrimination and education \(equalopportunity.gov.tt\)](http://equalopportunity.gov.tt)

OBJECTIVE 2: To assess the performance of Government and Government-assisted ECCE Centres for the period 2017-2022, inclusive of system implemented to combat learning loss experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic

Curriculum Development and Training

5.1.1. The Ministry of Education stated that there is National Curriculum Guide that is used by all ECCE centres. The guide was initially published in April 2005 and then edited in September 2013²⁶. The Ministry stated that the Guide prepares children for entry into primary school. The Ministry of Education stated that the Guide focuses on the holistic development of the child, using the five strands that included effective communication, intellectual empowerment, wellness, citizenship and belonging and aesthetic expression.

5.1.2. According to the THA-DERTech, while there is a National Curriculum Guide and they have previously hosted regular training and workshops to breakdown the guide, they stated that the guide is not standardized in terms of planning and delivery which may account for the differences at the private versus the government sector schools.

Monitoring of student performance at state-sponsored ECCE Centres

5.1.3. The Ministry of Education stated that children's development is monitored and measured using authentic assessment, which is an ongoing process of evaluating a child's development over time through real-life situations within the learning environment.

²⁶ <https://storage.moe.gov.tt/corporate/2022/09/NATIONAL-CURRICULUM-GUIDE.pdf>

5.1.4. The Ministry reported that the children are performing in alignment with developmental milestones. Student performance at the pre-primary level is determined from the children's portfolios and developmental checklist. Information obtained from these portfolios is used by the teacher to record if the child's developmental milestones are being met and this is recorded in the developmental checklist.

Impact of COVID-19 on the ECCE level

5.1.5. The Ministry reported that there were interventions or recommendations made at the ECCE level since the resumption of in-person classes. The Ministry stated that teachers were engaged in a learning and recovery enhancement programme (Let's REAP). The areas of focus for this professional development initiative were as follows::

- **Developing and using assessment to drive teaching and learning;**
- **Differentiated instructions;**
- **Enabling and inclusive conditions for learning;**
- **Building communities of practice focused on learning; and**
- **Strengthening leadership and accountability for learning in a distributed environment.**

5.1.6. The Ministry of Education reported that during the COVID-19 school closure they provided the following programs to combat learning loss:

- **The ECCE Division created ECCE Activity Packs which were weekly supplemental lessons provided in the national newspaper which targeted all domains of learning including physical, social/emotional and cognitive**

- **Online Activities (synchronous) online sessions included circle time (discussions about values) preparation for individual activity, stories/rhymes and recall of the day's activities**
- **Radio Programme – Storytelling and recall of daily activities**

Findings

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

- i. The existing curriculum guide is simply a guide of thematic areas that should be taught at the ECCE level. Because the guide does not require a mandatory method to deliver its content, there was some variation in what was taught at ECCE centres and consequently variations in learning outcomes.
- ii. It was stated that there was a lack of frameworks to assess the quality of service delivery and performance of the ECCE sector and an absence of standardized screenings of learners to ascertain developmental delays.
- iii. There is currently no standardized method to assess student performance at the ECCE level, particularly at private ECCE centres. Private ECCE centres assess their students as they see fit in preparation for entry into primary school.
- iv. The Ministry of Education stated that there were some plans to pilot assessment instruments to capture information about children's development and behaviour. **This includes the pilot testing of the Draft National Child Development Assessment and the Special Needs Assessment Profile, the latter that was previously piloted in October 2022.**
- v. The Ministry of Education stated that, there were systems in place to combat learning loss experienced at the ECCE level during the COVID-19 pandemic and interventions implemented since the resumption of in person classes. However, there was an absence of empirical data to gauge the performance of students during this timeframe.

- vi. Considering that there is no standardized method of assessment and the variations in the delivery of the curriculum guide, the THA-DERTech mentioned that there might be some challenges between children receiving training in Tobago then transitioning into schools in Trinidad. They mentioned that some students might not be as prepared.
- vii. While the Ministry of Education expressed that there was no variation in the standards applied within Government and Government assisted (denominational) centres, the same could not be determined for all private ECCE centres. There is also concern for unregistered ECCE centres and the overall level of compliance as it relates to the quality of teaching, the upkeep of school facilities and parental involvement due to these schools not being visited/inspected by personnel from the Ministry of Education.

Recommendations

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

- A. The Committee acknowledges the steps taken by the Ministry of Education to develop a standardized assessment tool for the ECCE level. In its Ministerial Response, the Ministry of Education should inform the Parliament of the results of the:**
 - c. Special Needs Assessment Profile (SNAP), which was previously piloted in 2022; and**
 - d. The Draft National Child Development Assessment Instrument.**

The Ministry of Education should also identify the ECCE centres across the country where these instruments were piloted.

- B. In addition to checking for infrastructural compliance, it is recommended that the Ministry of Education conduct clinical assessments on the delivery**

of lessons to determine the quality of teaching at various points of the academic year. It is recommended that emphasis be placed on private ECCE centres to ensure that they are keeping in line with the National Curriculum Guide and overall basic requirements for the age group.

OBJECTIVE 3: To assess the health and safety compliance of ECCE Centres

Health and Safety Requirements for Early Childhood Centres

6.1.1. The Ministry of Education stated that the National Policy on Early Childhood Care and Education 2005 Standards for Regulating Early Childhood Services Section 7²⁷ addressed health and safety practices that should be upheld within an ECCE centre. These include:

- Health and Safety Policy
- Emergency Protocol
- First Aid
- Hygiene Practices
- Medicine and Illness
- Fire Precautions
- Safety Precaution
- Substance Abuse and
- Pet Hygiene

6.1.2. It was learnt that the Ministry of Education inspects Government and Government assisted ECCE centres on a needs-basis.

Monitoring Health and Safety Compliance among ECCE Centres

6.1.3. It was learnt that the Public Health Department, Ministry of Health has a general responsibility for monitoring the level of compliance of these learning institutions in relation to health-related protocols and requirements.

²⁷ https://planipolis.iiep.unesco.org/sites/default/files/ressources/trinidad_and_tobago_ecce.pdf

- 6.1.4. During the 16th Joint Select Committee Meeting held on March 15th, the MoE stated that Government assisted centres are monitored by an assigned administrator on a daily basis. Field officers were also assigned to the SERVOL Centres.
- 6.1.5. Concerning Private ECCE centres, consent from the owner/operator of the property is still required for Ministry of Education officials to enter the premises.
- 6.1.6. It was stated that if the Ministry of Education is denied entry to visit a private ECCE centre that is located in a home, the Ministry would seek the assistance of the Ministry of Health to have Public Health Inspectors visit the premises.
- 6.1.7. In terms of risk management criteria, it was learnt that both the Public Health Department and the Health, Safety and Environment (HSE) Unit of the MoE inspect centres. The Ministry of Education reported that the HSE unit is responsible to ensure centres were compliant with the **Occupational Safety and Health Act, Chap 88.08**²⁸ and a rating scale is used to prioritize centres for inspection by the HSE unit.
- 6.1.8. It was reported by the Ministry of Health that during the period April 2022 to April 2023 **there were no issued notices by the Ministry of Health (MoH) to temporarily or permanently close any ECCE schools.** The Ministry of Health made no applications to the court for an order to close any ECCE schools during the aforementioned period.
- 6.1.9. It was noted that the Public Health Inspectorate may issue a notice to temporarily cease operations at an ECCE school for the following reasons;

²⁸ <https://agla.gov.tt/downloads/laws/88.08.pdf>

Table 4: Reasons for the temporary closure of schools according to the Public Health Inspectorate

| | |
|--|--|
| Facility's infrastructure is in an advanced state of disrepair | The presence of disease vectors (mosquitoes, rodents, fleas) |
| Inadequate functional water closets (water closets may be out of order due to a lack of maintenance) | Unsuitable food service facilities, eg. Storage and distribution of meals from the school feeding program (SFP) or cafeteria |
| Sewage backup or overflowing water closet bowls (blocked pipes or malfunctioning septic tank/soakaway pit) | Water stagnation and septicity created by a lack of maintenance of drains |
| Raw sewage flowing out of septic tank or soakaway pit system | Inadequate hand washing facilities |
| Inadequate ventilation or lighting | Inadequate or unstable drinking water supply |
| Inadequate or unsuitable facilities for garbage collection and disposal | |

6.1.10. It was learnt that Public Health Inspectors usually conduct inspections twice per year usually during the third school term and prior to the re-opening of the school term in September;

6.1.11. The Ministry of Health outlined details for inspection at ECCE schools. It was further stated that upon inspection, a report would be submitted with a defect notice to the Senior Public Health Inspector for review and consideration. Once the report is certified, the report and any recommendation are submitted to the County Medical Officer of Health (CMOH) for approval. The CMOH will issue the report and defect notice to the Principal of the school as well as the MoE.

6.1.12. During an inspection, identified defects and recommendations are communicated immediately to the accompanying personnel. The written defect notice once prepared is issued to the Principal and simultaneously copied to the Ministry of Education.

6.1.13. The Ministry of Health stated that if the health threat is imminent, the Medical Health Officer visits the school and verbally recommends closure to the Principal or Senior Teacher; a written notice then follows this. The notice is also sent to the Ministry of Education and they are informed of any interim Court Order to cease operations.

6.1.14. It was reported that while there is no risk management/assessment approach adopted to determine a priority list of schools for inspection as the school inspection programme involves the inspection and reporting on all schools annually, there is a risk assessment/management approach that is adopted for follow-up visits. The steps are outlined below:

- **Ensure corrective measures are implemented when a notice is served;**
- **Ensure minor defects that were not addressed do not deteriorate to more serious problems; or**
- **Monitor old and deteriorating infrastructure to ensure health problems do not recur.**

6.1.15. It was stated that the Ministry of Health does not communicate with the school and the Ministry of Education to schedule an inspection. It was further explained that the MoH visits the school and informs the Principal of their intention to execute an inspection and require the Principal or their representative to accompany the Public Health Inspector (PHI) throughout the inspection;

6.1.16. It was reported that the Public Health Inspectorate receives complaints about unsanitary conditions at ECCE institutions, however, these complaints are infrequent.

6.1.17. The Ministry of Health reported that for the period April 2022 to April 2023, there were no complaints of unsanitary conditions at ECCE institutions made to the CMOH's office. However, twelve requests were made to the Insect Vector Control Division (IVCD) for the spraying of mosquitoes.

Current capacity for Monitoring Health and Safety Compliance

6.1.18. The Ministry of Health stated that they do not have the capacity to increase monitoring.

6.1.19. The Ministry of Health reported that there is one public health inspector to every ten thousand (10,000) persons in the country. There are currently ten (10) public health inspector I that focus on school inspections.

6.1.20. The Ministry of Education stated that based on their records, there have been **"eighty-two (82) inspections conducted by the Ministry of Health at public and private ECCE centres in Trinidad during the academic year 2022-2023."** The Ministry of Education's Health, Safety and Environment (HSE) Unit inspected twenty-eight (28) public ECCE centres during that period.

Challenges with Compliance

6.1.21. Funding was identified as a major challenge to making improvements to structural issues that may have been raised as a Health and Safety problem. Major effects such as septic soakaways, overflowing septic tanks and old dilapidated schools, once a closing order is granted and there is need to rebuild an entire school or find alternative buildings for students, incur significant costs, especially for private schools.

6.1.22. Specifically, with private schools, it was reported that the main challenge was the availability of adequate space to do what needs to be done to make the necessary adjustments to become compliant (for example, additional toilet facilities

that are needed to help with the actual number of students in private institutions.)

Provision of Health and Safety Services

- 6.1.23. It was learnt that the National Maintenance Training and Security Company Limited (MTS) presently provides security services for only thirty-four (34) ECCE centres in Trinidad, which accounts for 24% of all Trinidad Government and Government assisted ECCE centres. They also provide janitorial services in 1 ECCE centre.
- 6.1.24. In their submission, MTS stated that they were contracted to place one officer during the day shift and one officer during the night shift at all centres where they have a presence, for twelve hours at a time. Recommendations were made to the Ministry of Education, for the provision of two officers to be placed at all ECCE centres.
- 6.1.25. With respect to infrastructural works at ECCE centres, the MTS stated that for the period September 2022 – May 2023, it received 59 requests. These requests were related to scope and cost estimates for Government ECCE Centres to be derived from the Ministry of Education, Educational Facilities Planning and Procurement Division.
- 6.1.26. It was further reported that Bill of quantities (BOQ) were prepared for the fifty-nine requests and were submitted to the Ministry of Education for approval. Of the fifty-nine submitted BOQs, approvals were received for thirty-eight (38) projects of which thirty-one (31) were completed and seven (7) are ongoing.
- 6.1.27. It was stated that MTS' services are available to private ECCE schools at a cost and once requested, a site visit would be scheduled, after which a proposal for services would be provided.

6.1.28. Despite the services that MTS continues to provide, the company report significant financial constraints. . This was partly attributed to outstanding payments owed to the company by the Ministry in the sum of 19.39Mn is for security services provided at ECCE centres as of June 15th 2023. Additionally, MTS commented on the low charge out rate currently paid to MTS by the Ministry of Education at \$24.00 per hour which has been the standing rate since 2008. MTS stated that the rate is below market value.

6.1.29. Infrastructural deficiencies were also highlighted by MTS and these included poor lighting, broken doors, locks and windows, decrepit guard booths and little or no electronic security.

6.1.30. It was stated that MTS is a wholly owned State Enterprise and is bound by the rules and regulations of the government which included ensuring that all statutory obligations are current. MTS further stated that they are not the recipient of any subvention from the government and they must compete for work in an open market with companies that do not carry statutory responsibilities as they do.

Repercussions for non-adherence

6.1.31. Minimum standards for operating an ECCE centre in Trinidad and Tobago include:

- Registration and licensing of ECCE centres;
- Staffing
- Quality Early Childhood practice;
- Quality standards for children from birth to three years old;
- Quality standards for Early Childhood environments for children between three and five years old;
- Record keeping;

- Health and Safety; and
- The physical environment

6.1.32. It was stated that proof of statutory approvals is required for the registration of an ECCE centre.

6.1.33. It was discovered that repercussions for non-compliance vary between the public and private ECCE centre

6.1.34. The Ministry of Education reported that **the rate of compliance with statutory approvals is very low**, which was made evident by the large number of centres the opened and operated without being registered with the Ministry of Education.

6.1.35. Consequences of non-compliance with statutory approval requirements fall under the remit of the respective issuing agencies²⁹.

6.1.36. Specifically, with DERTech, it was reported that while they cannot shut non-compliant schools down, they can report them to the Division of Health. According to their records, they did not have any cases of school closures in the past five years.

Findings

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

- i. There is an overall deficit in the capturing of health and safety compliance data among private ECCE schools. The Committee learnt that the Ministry of Health does not have any data prior to 2020 regarding school closures. No schools have been closed in 2022.

²⁹ The following agencies are responsible for statutory approval requirements: WASA, Electrical Inspectorate (Public Utilities Commission) Trinidad and Tobago Fire Service, Regional Health Authorities, Ministry of Planning and Development, Town and Country Planning Division.

- ii. Given the current lack of resources necessary for state agencies such as the Ministry of Health, to conduct regular inspections, it is reasonable to deduce that several ECCE centres have never been subject to an inspection.
- iii. It was learnt that minor defects that require low budgetary solutions are often addressed at the school level, however, in the event there is a major defect where significant funding is required, corrective measures may take a longer time due to the budgetary approval process.

Recommendations

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

- A. By the next six months, it is recommended that the Ministry of Education develops a definite and standardized risk management/assessment prioritization rubric for the inspection of schools.**
- B. In terms of the challenges to comply with Health and safety requirements (which generally stem from the inability to finance the required infrastructural improvements), it is recommended that the Ministry of Education provide technical support in collaboration with MTS and the Occupational and Health Agency (OSHA) to registered private institutions.**
- C. The response of the MoE should include an overview of the proposed strategy of the Ministry for encouraging private ECCE schools to participate in the proposed three-year moratorium.**
- D. The Committee endorses the recommendations made by MTS regarding the placement of two officers at the ECCE centres nationwide. This placement should be based on security and surveillance best practices as well as general**

Risk Assessments of ECCE centres to determine which schools should be assigned additional officers.

- E. In their Ministerial Response, the Ministry of Education should indicate the amount paid to MTS since the commencement of the new fiscal year 2023/2024 and the value of outstanding payments owed to the MTS to date.**

- F. The MoE should consider collaborating with the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs to develop a “flagging system” as part of its revision of the registration process. This system would promptly notify the Ministry of Education when the Ministry of Legal Affairs registers an early childhood centre as a business. Such a system aims to facilitate proper inspection processes for schools and prevent them from operating without completing the entire registration process.**

- G. Within three months of the presentation of this report, the procedure for reporting complaints concerning poor health and safety arrangements in ECCE centres should be prominently published on the Ministry of Education’s website and social media pages.**

OBJECTIVE 4: To assess the ECCE curriculum in relation to preparation of children for primary school

ECCE Curriculum

6.1.37. The MoE stated that there is a National Curriculum Guide³⁰ that is applicable to all ECCE centres.

6.1.38. The MoE submitted that the ECCE curriculum is adequate in preparing children for primary school.

6.1.39. Conversely, it was also stated by THA-DERTech that while the curriculum provides a good foundation, it was not adequate enough as it is too broad based and needed to be upgraded, fleshed out as well as be more inclusive to children with special needs.

6.1.40. It was reported that there are varying levels of readiness in early childhood learners as they transition into primary schools due to the variations of interpretations of the curriculum.

6.1.41. It was learnt that the current curriculum guide was last edited in September 2013 and a review was required.

6.1.42. The Ministry of Education stated that the process of review began in 2019 and was interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The review is currently ongoing.

Special Needs Education

6.1.43. It was reported that a special needs assessment document is distributed to all ECCE centres aiding the MoE in identifying students suspected of having a disability or those with documented diagnoses. Additionally, the Ministry

³⁰ <https://storage.moe.gov.tt/corporate/2022/09/NATIONAL-CURRICULUM-GUIDE.pdf>

would verify the information received and provide support to teachers along with screening for children.

- 6.1.44. MoE stated that there is a nine-step process for accessing support for special needs students that centre on observation and intervention for support for special needs cases. It was further explained that if there is no improvement, an approval form with supporting documentation is forwarded to the student support services division of the Ministry of Education. If required, the student is then referred to the Development Assessment Intervention Unit of the SSSD which houses psychologists who will then provide further evaluation or referral to an external agency or service provider.
- 6.1.45. The Ministry of Education reported that as of **June 27th 2023**, there were ninety-three (93) suspected cases of students presenting with “different abilities” and disabilities, thirty-one (31) diagnosed students. As of that date, it was reported that ten (10) students were receiving intervention; five (5) from speech therapy and five (5) from language therapy.
- 6.1.46. Based on the schools visited by the Committee during its site visits, teachers indicated an increase of children entering with psycho-educational and developmental challenges and while they try to accommodate the needs of these students, most teachers are not specifically trained in special needs education.
- 6.1.47. According to the Ministry of Education, students who have been diagnosed received individualized education plans, which have been developed by recommendations of interventions. Teachers, guardians and teachers then implement the education plans.
- 6.1.48. The MoE also stated that student aids are provided upon diagnosis and request. It was explained that parents would be advised by the student support services

to have the aid or apply for the aid and the Ministry would try to facilitate.

6.1.49. The Ministry of Education reported that **“four (4) student aides are currently assigned to public ECCE centres in Trinidad.”** The Ministry stated that they are in the process of recruiting additional Student Aides.

6.1.50. The Ministry of Education has been in consultation with the OJT department to provide aid for students.

6.1.51. Children with special needs are integrated into government and government assisted schools in Tobago. It was reported however, that these schools have a strong student support services sector that works along with their nutrition sector to ensure that children are diagnosed and remediated with references made for a smooth seamless transition into primary school.

Monitoring of Student Performance

6.1.52. The MoE reported that formal testing and tracing of students who have transitioned into primary school is not done at an institutional level.

6.1.53. The Ministry stated a few assessment methods and tools that are used at the ECCE level and continued at the Infant I and II level. These include portfolios, anecdotal reports, observation and recoding, work sampling and developmental checklists.

6.1.54. The Ministry reported collaborating with **the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) at Rutgers University** to develop a **National Child Development Assessment Instrument** that once piloted by the MOE, the instrument would be transitioned to the primary school with the child.

Findings

Based on the preceding evidence, the Committee’s findings are as follows:

- i. There appeared to be some discrepancies regarding whether the current curriculum adequately prepares ECCE students for primary school.
- ii. It was learnt that while the National Curriculum Guidelines is applicable to all ECCE centres, its delivery is not standardized and its usage is not mandatory. While it is used at the government/government assisted ECCE centres, the Committee learned that a mixture of material (sourced online, or self-generated) was popular teaching technique among some teachers especially at the Private centres.
- iii. There is a notable delay in the revision of the ECCE curriculum guide.
- iv. THA-DERTech stated that revision to the curriculum requires further detail of guidelines as well as consideration for the inclusion of special education, technology and an overall standardized approach to transitioning from pre-school to primary school.
- v. Some ECCE teachers communicated with primary school teachers and prepared their students for primary school based on the information they received.
- vi. While there was no standardized means of testing or tracing performance post transition to primary school, many teachers kept in contact with parents of their former students or were in contact with primary school teachers and they would inquire about their performance at the new school. Most teachers mentioned that they received no complaints about their former students and most students seem to transition well into primary school. However, these circumstances and practices which exist in a handful of schools. A more comprehensive research study of the ECCE sector is required in order to obtain more empirical evidence on the learning experiences and outcomes of students.

- vii. Most teachers are not trained in special needs education to meet the needs of students with psycho-educational and developmental challenges. While teachers may attempt to support students as best as they can, more severe cases were usually beyond the capacity of the teachers' capabilities.
- viii. The MoE faces an overall deficiency in screening and evaluating students with potential psychoeducational and developmental challenges primarily due to staff shortages in the SSSD department.
- ix. Immediate support/immediate intervention is still required for students showing educational/developmental challenges and potential special needs interventions. While the Ministry provides a nine-step process for accessing support, the process is often lengthy and support is not guaranteed due to staffing challenges. Despite having, intervention strategies available, there is still a challenge with the capacity to implement based on the current demand.
- x. In terms of support for special needs education, it was found that technical support is sporadic.
- xi. The Ministry stated that they are still trying to build the capacity of the student support division. A note has been prepared for Cabinet and has gone to PMCD so at some point they will have additional resources and additional contract positions for employment to fill the needs.

Recommendations

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

- A. As part of its Ministerial response, the Ministry of Education should provide an update on the following:**

- **National Child Development Assessment Instrument as well as the revision of the National Curriculum Guide for ECCE.**
 - **The outcome of the consultation with the OJT department to provide aids for students.**
 - **An update on the status of on the revised National Curriculum Guide**
- B. The Committee acknowledges the point made by the Division of Education, Research and Technology (DERTech) that there should be a standardized framework or syllabus to be used across all ECCE sectors. The Committee accepts the recommendation made by DERTech that the curriculum needs to be upgraded accordingly.**
- C. There is need to increase the number teachers trained in special needs education to meet the growing needs of students in the ECCE sector.**
- D. Considering the provision of student aides, the Ministry of Education can also consider developing a partnership with UTT to allow final year Special Needs educators to work at various ECCE centres as part of a paid internship in addition to sourcing student aides via the OJT programme.**
- E. It is recommended that the Ministry of Education establish strategic partnerships with private educational and developmental psychologists. This collaboration can take the form of a “support a child” programme where the corporate community is encouraged to sponsor the psycho-social assessment, remediation and support of a special needs child. This collaboration aims to address the increasing demand for comprehensive assessments and intervention plans catering to children at the ECCE level.**

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

Dr. Paul Richards
Chairman

Mr. Roger Monroe, MP
Vice-Chairman

Mr. Avinash Singh, MP
Member

Mr. David Nakhid
Member

Ms. Vandana Mohit, MP
Member

Mr. Esmond Forde, MP
Member

Mrs. Pennelope Beckles, MP
Member

Mr. Rohan Sinanan, MP
Member

March 22, 2024

APPENDICES

Appendix I – List of officials who appeared and provided oral evidence

| Name of Official | Portfolio | Organization |
|---|---|---|
| Public Hearing Held on March 15, 2023 | | |
| <p>Dr. Peter Smith</p> <p>Ms. Carol Bhagwandin</p> <p>Ms. Michelle Collins</p> <p>Ms. Susan Gopaul</p> <p>Ms. Elizabeth Courtney</p> | <p>Chief Education Officer</p> <p>Director, ECCE</p> <p>Research Officer</p> <p>SERVOL ECCE Consultant</p> <p>SERVOL Coordinator</p> | <p>Ministry of Education</p> |
| <p>Mrs. Elizabeth Lewis</p> <p>Mr. Marlon Bascombe</p> | <p>Deputy Director – Legal & Regulatory Services (AG.)</p> <p>Manager – Investigation & Intervention Unit – North East</p> | <p>Children’s Authority of Trinidad and Tobago</p> |
| <p>Ms. Ann Second</p> <p>Ms. Loraine George-Edoo</p> | <p>Technical Advisor</p> <p>ECCE Manager</p> | <p>Tobago House of Assembly Division of Education, Research and Technology</p> |

| Name of Official | Portfolio | Organization |
|---|--|---|
| Public Hearing Held on June 28, 2023 | | |
| Ms. Simone Williams | Deputy Permanent Secretary | Ministry of Education |
| Ms. Carol Bhagwandin | Director, ECCE | |
| Ms. Ayinka Nurse-Carrington | Manager, Student Support Service Division | |
| Ms. Michelle Collins | Research Officer, ECCE | |
| Ms. Jasmin Lewis Johnson | ECCE Administrator/Teacher (Port of Spain and Environs) | |
| Ms. Denise Murren Mohan | ECCE Administrator/Teacher (Caroni) | |
| Ms. Sharon Sookhan | ECCE Administrator/Teacher (South Eastern) | |
| Mrs. Ann Natasha Second | Technical Advisor | Tobago House of Assembly- Division of Education, Research and Technology (THA-DERTech) |
| Mrs. Loraine George-Edoo | ECCE Manager | |
| Mrs. Nadine Philips –Alleyne | Administrator/Teacher Signal Hill ECCE | |
| Mrs. Lindell Rochford | Administration/Teacher Mt. St. George ECCE | |
| Name of Official | Portfolio | Organization |
| Dr. Osafo Fraser | Country Medical Officer of Health | Ministry of Health |
| Dr. Mark Dookeran | Chief Public Health Inspector Ag. | |

| Name of Official | Portfolio | Organization |
|---------------------------------|--|---|
| Mr. Lennox Rattansingh | Chief Executive Officer | National Maintenance Training and Security Company Limited (MTS) |
| Mr. Desmond Daly | Divisional Manager, Security | |
| Mr. Christopher Lackrajh | Construction Operations Man- ager | |
| Mr. Sherwin Gosine | Divisional Manager, Marketing | |

Appendix II – Minutes of 16th Meeting

MINUTES OF THE SIXTEENTH MEETING OF THE JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE OF PARLIAMENT ON SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION,

HELD ON MARCH 15, 2023

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. Avinash Singh | Member |
| Mr. Rohan Sinanan | Member |
| Ms. Vandana Mohit, MP | Member |
| Mr. David Nakhid | Member |

ABSENT/EXCUSED

| | |
|----------------------|---------------|
| Mr. Roger Monroe, MP | Vice-Chairman |
| Ms. Penelope Beckles | Member |

Secretariat

| | |
|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| Mr. Julien Ogilvie | Secretary |
| Ms. Rochelle Stafford | Parliamentary Researcher |
| Ms. Nicole Brown | Parliamentary Researcher |

CALL TO ORDER

- 1.1 The Chairman called the meeting to order at 9:30 a.m. and welcomed members present.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

- 2.1 The Chairman advised that the following Members asked to be excused from the day's proceedings.
- Ms. Penelope Beckles
 - Mr. Roger Monroe, MP;

CONFIRMATION OF MINUTES OF THE FOURTEENTH MEETING HELD ON FRIDAY FEBRUARY 3, 2023

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

MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES

- 4.1 The Chairman highlighted the following matters:
- i. **Item 4.1, page 2** - The Secretariat received written submissions from the Ministry of Works and Transport and the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services.
 - ii. **Item 5.5, page 2** – YTEPP submitted their written submission dated February 10, 2023.

CONSIDERATION AND APPROVAL OF THE COMMITTEE'S 5TH REPORT ON AN INQUIRY INTO THE STATE'S CAPACITY TO PROVIDE SUPPORT FOR VICTIMS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND FAMILY CONFLICTS (WITH SPECIFIC FOCUS ON THE AVAILABILITY OF SUPPORT MECHANISMS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC)

- 5.1 The Chairman informed Members that the Secretariat circulated the Draft Fifth Report to members by email on Friday March 10, 2023 for feedback and approval.
- 5.2 The Chairman invited members to review the main findings and recommendations contained in the draft and provide feedback by Monday March 20, 2023.
- 5.3 Members agreed to present the report at the next sitting of the House of Representatives and the Senate.

CONSIDERATION OF WORK PROGRAMME

- 6.1. The Chairman invited Members to consider the Committee's Work Programme.
- 6.2. Members agreed that the Committee should focus its attention on the health sector with the following inquiries in order of priority:
 - i. A preliminary assessment of this country's response to the prevalence of Non-communicable diseases in Trinidad and Tobago with specific focus on Diabetes, Cardiovascular Diseases and Cancer;
 - ii. An examination of the efficacy of the CDAP programme; and
 - iii. An examination of the state of out-patient clinics in the public health care system with specific focus on the Diabetic Clinic, Chest Clinic and HIV Clinic.
- 6.3. The Chairman proposed that given the technical nature of the aforementioned inquiry topics and the fact that there were no medical practitioners or public health management specialist serving on the Committee, that the Secretariat approach the Medical Association of Trinidad and Tobago and related bodies in the first instance to seek pro bono assistance and should the need arise, a request be made to the Clerk of the House for the recruitment of a specialist advisor to assist the Committee to navigate its inquiries into the public health sector. Members agreed to the proposal.
- 6.4. In addition to the inquiries proposed, the Committee also agreed to conduct a follow-up, paper-based inquiry into Geriatric Homes.

PRE-HEARING DISCUSSIONS RE: *1st public hearing re: An examination of the regulation and administration of public and private early childhood institutions in Trinidad and Tobago*

- 7.1 The Chairman indicated that later in the proceedings, the Committee would convene its first hearing with stakeholders pursuant to its *inquiry into the regulation and administration of public and private early childhood institutions in Trinidad and Tobago*.
- 7.2 Members were advised that officials of the following entities were expected to participate in the day's hearing:
 - i. Ministry of Education;
 - ii. Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago; and
 - iii. Tobago House of Assembly- Division of Education, Research and Technology.

- 7.3 Members confirmed that they were in receipt of the following documents:
- i. Written Submission from the entities listed above; and
 - ii. Issues Papers prepared by the Secretariat based on the Written Submission of the aforementioned entities.
- 7.4 The Committee discussed the approach to be taken during the hearing.

OTHER BUSINESS

Proposed Date and Agenda for Next Meeting

- 8.1 The Chairman proposed that the Committee conduct site visits to a sample of Government and Government-assisted ECCE Centres to:
- i. acquire a first-hand account of the operations of these ECCE Centres;
 - ii. acquire a realistic perspective of the issues/challenges which may be impacting the ECCE Centres with a view to making informed findings and feasible recommendations in its report to Parliament; and
 - iii. verify evidence received in writing or during the public hearing.
- 8.2 After some discussion, the Committee agreed to conduct site visits to ECCE centres as part of the evidence-gathering process for the inquiry.

SUSPENSION

- 9.1 The Chairman suspended the meeting at 9:53 a.m.
- 9.2 The Chairman suspended the meeting at 9:53 a.m.

PUBLIC HEARING RE: *1st public hearing re: An examination of the regulation and administration of public and private early childhood institutions in Trinidad and Tobago*

- 8.1 The meeting resumed in public at 10:15 a.m.
- 8.2 The following persons joined the meeting:

Ministry of Education

- | | |
|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. Dr. Peter Smith | Chief Education Officer |
| 2. Ms. Carol Bhagwandin | Director, ECCE |
| 3. Ms. Michelle Collins | Research Officer |
| 4. Ms. Elizabeth Courtney | SERVOL Coordinator |
| 5. Ms. Susan Gopaul | SERVOL Coordinator |

Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago (CATT)

- | | |
|---------------------------------|--|
| 1. Mrs. Elizabeth Lewis | Deputy Director – Legal & Regulatory Services (Ag.) |
| 2. Mr. Marlon Bascombe North | Manager- Investigation & Intervention Unit East |

Tobago House of Assembly- Division of Education, Research and Technology

- | | |
|----------------------------|-------------------|
| 1. Ms. Ann Second | Technical Advisor |
| 2. Ms. Loraine George-Edoo | ECCE Manager |

Opening Statements

- 8.3 The chief officials of the aforementioned entities made brief opening remarks.

Key Issues Discussed

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

Regulation of ECCE Institutions

- i. There was an overall absence of specific legislation to deal with the regulation of early childhood centres in Trinidad and Tobago. The MoE stated that the Chief Parliamentary Counsel (CPC) was in the process of amending the Education Act to include ECCE services. It was expected that this amendment will be finalized by the year's end.
- ii. The CPC, with support from the MoE Legal Unit, was in the process of amending the Education Act Chap. 39:01.

Monitoring of ECCE Institutions

- i. Government and Government assisted ECCE centres are monitored on a daily basis by an assigned ECCE administrator, similarly, field officers are assigned to monitor SERVOL centres.
- ii. There was irregular monitoring of Private (Unregistered) ECCE Schools given that most private centres are operated from private residences. In such instances, the Ministry has to seek permission to visit these properties. The main issues highlighted include infrastructural shortcomings relating to lighting, bathroom facilities and high turnover of staff.
- iii. While private centres are mandated to be registered in keeping with the current Education Act, the Ministry has noticed that many centres are emerging without being registered.
- iv. There was a lack of a risk management protocol in place, however, support was always offered to the ECCE centres. The Ministry maintains that this protocol was being worked on.
- v. The Ministry of Education was not responsible for shutting down centres. The Public Health Inspectorate was responsible for shutting down centres that were not meeting health and safety standards. The MoE was not aware of any centres that have been shut down. It was mentioned that previously, this information would have been communicated, but presently it is not.
- vi. It was estimated that 50% of private ECCE centres were not compliant with health and safety requirements.

Requirements

- i. In terms of general teaching requirements, persons must at minimum, have a certificate in early childhood care and education from an accredited tertiary institution.
- ii. In terms of health requirements, it was mentioned by the MoE that persons were not required to have first aid qualifications, but the Ministry works with the Ministry of Health to ensure overall health standards at centres are met.
- iii. All schools must have a health and safety policy procedure.
- iv. Registration certificates must be displayed in a prominent location at ECCE institutions

Reports of Incidents

- iii. The Ministry reported that there was a very low number of major at this time, and for the last academic only two incidents were recorded.

The following are the main themes arising from discussions with the **Children’s Authority of Trinidad and Tobago**

Regulation

- i. The Children’s Authority is responsible for the licensing of nurseries, not ECCE centres.

Nursery Gap Analysis

- ii. The CATT stated that despite the suspension of the Nursery Gap Analysis due to the COVID-19 pandemic, they conducted preliminary research that provided some insight into this area. The CATT also indicated that they do not have a date to resume the research started in this area.

School Placement

- iii. It was estimated that it can take between three to six weeks to transfer a child (to another school) who may have been removed from the custody of their parents.
- iv. The main challenges identified included the delay in receipt of documentation (such as birth certificates, immunization records etc.). The delay may also be attributed to a lack of spaces at schools to accommodate transfers.

Reports of Abuse

- v. The Children’s Authority of Trinidad and Tobago stated that they do receive reports of abuse at ECCE centres but will provide the exact figure in writing. They stated that when a report is received, investigations were conducted through the usual channels.
- vi. The CATT is concerned about the unregulated nature of the Early Childhood Care Sector and recognizes the need to ensure there are regulations and legislation to govern these centres.

The following are the main themes arising from discussions with the **Tobago House of Assembly- Division of Education, Research and Technology (DERTech)**.

Registration

- i. There are currently one-hundred and twenty-three (123) Centres that are not registered.
- ii. The DERTech mentioned that the lengthy time-frame it takes to complete the registration process is a deterrent for some of the ECCE centres to pursue registration.

- iii. There is usually a low response rate to registration drives among ECCE Centres. As a result, the DERTech was in the process of further engaging the public on this matter.
- iv. The absence of a legal framework governing the ECCE centre makes it challenging for the DERTech to obtain any information from the private sectors.

Government-assisted ECCE Centres

- v. There is a small number of SERVOL or Government-assisted ECCE Centres in Tobago and they are overcrowded.
- vi. While the Government-assisted centres were over-capacity, the DERTech maintains that the provision of services at these centres was still very good.

Cultural Resistance

- vii. Change management challenges were observed both with the DERTech and in public as it related to the implementation of proposed changes to the manner in which ECCE is managed in Tobago
- viii. Internally, it was mentioned that there was some resistance to any change in management and strategic direction. It was observed that while duties were being performed, such duties were not being undertaken collaboratively. .
- ix. Some private centres may refuse to become registered and conform to regulations and standards. Parents may also be comfortable sending their children to these private institutions.

Gaps Identified within the ECCE Sector in Trinidad and Tobago

- x. Lack of ratification of existing laws.
- xi. Lack of compliance among unregulated centres.
- xii. There is a general reluctance of some institutions to become registered.
- xiii. There is inadequate information on the total number of unregistered institutions.
- xiv. Limited standardization at private/public centres.

ADJOURNMENT

10.1 The meeting was adjourned accordingly at 11:58 a.m.

I certify that these Minutes are true and correct.

Chairman

Secretary

June 16, 20

Appendix III – Minutes of 17th Meeting

**MINUTES OF THE SEVENTEENTH MEETING OF THE JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE OF
PARLIAMENT ON SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION,
HELD ON WEDNESDAY JUNE 28, 2023**

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. Avinash Singh | Member |
| Ms. Vandana Mohit, MP | Member |
| Mr. David Nakhid | Member |

ABSENT/EXCUSED

| | |
|--------------------------|--------|
| Mr. Esmond Forde, MP | Member |
| Ms. Penelope Beckles, MP | Member |
| Mr. Rohan Sinanan | Member |

Secretariat

| | |
|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| Mr. Julien Ogilvie | Secretary |
| Mr. Brian Lucio | Assistant Secretary |
| Ms. Rochelle Stafford | Parliamentary Researcher |
| Ms. Nicole Brown | Parliamentary Researcher |

CALL TO ORDER

1.2 The Chairman called the meeting to order at 9:38 a.m. and welcomed members present.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

2.2 The Chairman advised that the following Members asked to be excused from the day's proceedings.

- Ms. Penelope Beckles, MP; and
- Mr. Esmond Forde, MP.

CONFIRMATION OF MINUTES OF THE SIXTEENTH MEETING HELD ON WEDNESDAY MARCH 15, 2023

3.2 The Minutes were confirmed without amendments on a motion moved by Mr. Avinash Singh and seconded by Mr. Roger Monroe, MP.

MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES

4.2 The Chairman highlighted the following matters:

- iii. **Item 5.3, page 2** – The Committee's 5th Report on an Inquiry into the State's Capacity to Provide Support for Victims of Domestic Violence and Family Conflicts (with specific focus on the Availability of Support Mechanisms during the Covid-19 Pandemic) was presented in the House of Representatives and Senate on March 24, 2023 and March 24, 2023, respectively.
- iv. **Item 6.3, page 3** – The Secretariat will utilise the recess period to firstly engage the Medical Association of Trinidad and Tobago and other bodies with a view to recruiting the requisite specialist advisor to assist the Committee to navigate its inquiries into the public health sector.
- v. **Item 8.2, page 4** – The Committee conducted two rounds of Site Visits.
 - Firstly, on Wednesday April 19, 2023, the Committee visited:
 1. Holy Rosary Preparatory School;
 2. Rainbow Munchkin Kindergarten;
 3. Ramdial's Pre-School; and
 4. Nur- E- Islam ECCE Centre.
 - Then on Monday May 01, 2023, the Committee visited:
 1. Maharaj Pre-School;
 2. Gopie Trace Kindergarten ECCE;
 3. La Romaine Government ECCE;
 4. Revival Tabernacle Kindergarten; and
 5. Lenore's Kindergarten.

CONSIDERATION OF DRAFT REPORT ON SITE VISITS TO ECCE CENTRES

- 5.4 The Chairman invited Ms. Rochelle Stafford, Parliamentary Researcher, to brief Members on the Draft Report on Site Visits to the ECCE Centres.
- 5.5 Members discussed the Draft Site Visit Report and highlighted their experiences vis-à-vis site visits.

PRE-HEARING DISCUSSIONS RE: 2nd public hearing re: An examination of the regulation and administration of public and private early childhood institutions in Trinidad and Tobago

- 7.5 The Chairman indicated that later in the proceedings, the Committee would convene its second hearing with stakeholders pursuant to its *inquiry into the regulation and administration of public and private early childhood institutions in Trinidad and Tobago*.
- 7.6 Members were advised that officials of the following entities were expected to participate in the day's hearing:
- iv. Ministry of Education;
 - v. Ministry of Health;
 - vi. Tobago House of Assembly - Division of Education, Research and Technology; and
 - vii. National Maintenance Training and Security Company Ltd (MTS).
- 7.7 Members confirmed that they were in receipt of the following documents:
- iii. Written Submissions from the entities listed above;
 - iv. Issues Papers prepared by the Secretariat based on the Written Submission of the Ministry of Health and MTS; and
 - v. Questions to the Ministry of Education arising from Site Visits to ECCE Schools.
- 7.8 The Committee discussed the approach to be taken during the hearing.

OTHER BUSINESS

Proposed Date and Agenda for Next Meeting

- 8.3 The Chairman reminded Members that:
- i. the Standing Orders prescribe that the Parliament must proceed on recess from the first week in July 2023 to the first week in September, 2023; and

- ii. following the recess period, the Committee will turn its attention to the Public Health Care System and will conduct at least three (3) inquiries into matters related to the delivery of public health care services.

8.4 The Chairman indicated that the Secretariat will utilise the recess to:

- i. Draft outstanding Committee reports; and
- ii. Conduct background research in preparation for the new session.

SUSPENSION

9.3 The Chairman suspended the meeting at 10:07 a.m.

PUBLIC HEARING RE: 2nd public hearing re: An examination of the regulation and administration of public and private early childhood institutions in Trinidad and Tobago

8.4 The meeting resumed in public at 10:15 a.m.

8.5 The following persons joined the meeting:

Ministry of Education

- | | |
|--------------------------------|---|
| 6. Ms. Simone Williams | Deputy Permanent Secretary |
| 7. Ms. Carol Bhagwandin | Director, ECCE |
| 8. Ms. Ayinka Nurse-Carrington | Manager, Student Support Service |
| 9. Ms. Jasmine Lewis Johnson | ECCE Administrator/Teacher (Port of Spain and Environs) |
| 10. Ms. Denise Murren Moham | ECCE Administrator/Teacher (Caroni) |
| 11. Ms. Sharon Sookhan | ECCE Administrator/Teacher (South Eastern) |

Tobago House of Assembly- Division of Education, Research and Technology

- | | |
|---------------------------------|--|
| 3. Ms. Ann Second | Technical Advisor |
| 4. Ms. Loraine George-Edoo | ECCE Manager |
| 5. Mrs. Nadine Phillips-Alleyne | Administrator/Teacher Signal Hill ECCE |
| 6. Mrs Lindell Rochford | Administration/Teacher Mt. St. George ECCE |

Ministry of Health

- | | |
|---------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1. Dr. Osafo Fraser | Country Medical Officer of Health |
|---------------------|-----------------------------------|

National Maintenance Training and Security Company Limited (MTS)

- | | |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1. Mr. Lennox Rattansigh | Chief Executive Officer |
| 2. Mr. Desmond Daly | Divisional Manager, Security |
| 3. Mr. Christopher Lackrajh | Construction Operations Manager |

4. Mr. Sherwin Gosine

Divisional Manager, Marketing

Opening Statements

8.6 The chief officials of the aforementioned entities made brief opening remarks.

Key Issues Discussed

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

Approval of Policy

- iv. The policy on the registration of private schools (inclusive of private ECCE centres) was approved by Cabinet in June 2023.
- v. The aforementioned policy outlines the procedure for all unregistered schools as well as governs the operation of private schools in Trinidad and Tobago.
- vi. A key aspect of this policy includes the strengthening of the Monitoring and Evaluation Unit of the ECCE Division. This will include monitoring in terms of meeting requirements of registration and performance.
- vii. Through the new policy, schools that are found to be deficient or non-compliant can be deregistered.

Provision of Technical Support

- viii. The Ministry of Education stated that technical support is provided to schools to assist them in becoming compliant.
- ix. Mention was made of an outreach exercise for private ECCE Centres to inform them of the type of assistance that was needed in order to become compliant.
- x. The Ministry admitted that they were experiencing some challenges with site visits and delivery of support due to the ECCE Division not being fully staffed.
- xi. In terms of training and development of teachers, the Ministry of Education provides on-going training that is open to all providers (both government/government- assisted and private providers).

Employment of Teachers

- xii. In response to concerns that ECCE teachers having to reapply or continuously seek reemployment for the same positions they currently hold, the Ministry of Education stated that these positions, unlike the rest of the teaching service are contract positions. As a result, The Ministry is guided by the guidelines provided by the Chief Personnel Officer which mandates that contract positions are to be advertised and interested persons are to apply/reapply.

- xiii. Contract officers are awarded a 20% gratuity at the end of their contract.
- xiv. The Ministry of Education was in the process of clearing the backlogs of payments to ensure that contract staff receive their payments.

Provision of Special Needs Education and Support

- xv. Through the special needs assessment for ECCE centres, it was stated that as of 27th June 2023, there were ninety-three (93) suspected cases of students presenting with different abilities and thirty-one (31) currently diagnosed.
- xvi. Of the thirty-one (31) diagnosed students, ten (10) students were receiving intervention. Five (5) from the special education services and five (5) from speech and language therapy.
- xvii. Other interventions may or may not include social work services through home visits, guidance and counselling services as well as occupational and behavioural therapy.
- xviii. Students who were receiving intervention have been referred to the Ministry of Education through the Student Support Services Division.
- xix. The Ministry stated there is a nine-step process for the referral of students with special needs where the teacher monitors and engages with the parent. If there is no improvement, then the approval form with supporting documentation is sent to Student Support Services Division of the MoE.
- xx. Regarding the steps for referral, once the supporting documentation is provided, the case is assigned to a school social worker, special education officer or guidance officer and recommendations are implemented. The student is then monitored over time.
- xxi. If required, the student is referred to the Developmental Assessment Intervention Unit of the SSSD for further evaluation or referral or to an external service provider.
- xxii. Diagnosed students receive an individualized education plan that will then be implemented by teachers and parents/guardians. Progress is monitored by the parents, teachers and SSSD personnel.
- xxiii. The Ministry also noted that student aids are provided. At the ECCE level, two students have been provided with student aids upon their diagnosis and request.
- xxiv. There were still delays for persons receiving Special Needs Education and Support at the ECCE level.
- xxv. Delays were as a result of staffing challenges at the Ministry.
- xxvi. The Ministry stated that they were in consultation with the Ministry of Labour to provide aid for teachers via the OJT Programme.

Standardization of the Curriculum

- xxvii. The Ministry stated that there is a Research Based curriculum – which is a national document that is used. It is available on the Ministry of Education’s Website.
- xxviii. The Ministry of Education stated that the curriculum prepares the child for entry into primary school.

Transition from private schools to government assisted schools

- xxix. The Ministry noted that there were twenty-one (21) denominational boards in Trinidad and Tobago. To become a government-assisted centre, a private institution would need to belong to any one of the denominational boards.
- xxx. Once a school falls under a denominational board, consideration would be given and a memorandum of understanding, outlining the responsibilities of the individual or the denominational body and the responsibilities of the Ministry of Education, would be signed.

The following are the main themes arising from discussions with the **Ministry of Health**

School Inspections

- vii. Inspections are usually done prior to school closing in July, to allow the school to have sufficient time to comply with notices and take the necessary corrective measures.
- viii. Schools are usually revisited in September, prior to the reopening of the school term to ensure that corrective measures are done.
- ix. If corrective measures are done and there are no objections, the school can open in September. However, if the corrective measures are not done, a risk assessment is done to determine whether or not the threats are eminent to the children and the staff of the school.
- x. An imminent threat includes sewerage back up, overflowing toilets, septic tank overflow, or other risks that pose an immediate threat to the health and safety of the children
- xi. The Ministry of Education is not informed of the inspections. The Principals of the school however are asked to accompany officials during the inspection of the school.
- xii. Once defects are identified, reports and notices are prepared and signed by the medical officer of health and they are then issued to the principal as well as the Ministry of Education.
- xiii. Public Health Inspectors have access to all private and government schools according to law.
- xiv. If threats are imminent, the Ministry of Health can apply to the court for a Closing Order.

- xv. If the threats are moderate, the Ministry of Health works with the Ministry of Education to rectify the defects. The Ministry of Health also monitors to ensure that the defects do not escalate to imminent threats.
- xvi. The Ministry of Health estimates that they have visited approximately one hundred and fifty (150) schools annually.
- xvii. These 150 schools were mainly government schools due to smaller (private) ECCE schools are sometimes difficult to identify.
- xviii. The Ministry of Health noted that they did not have enough staff to increase the number of inspections and monitoring.

Challenges observed with defects at ECCE centres

- xix. Some of the major defects observed at ECCE schools which require significant funding include blocked septic soakaway systems and overflowing systems.
- xx. Old or dilapidated schools requires the input of the Ministry of Works, Chief Design Engineer and if it is recommended that the school is a threat, the Ministry of Health may apply for a closing order.
- xxi. If the closing order is granted, then there is need to rebuild the entire school or find an alternative building for students which was identified by the Ministry of Health as a significant cost.
- xxii. Additionally, it was noted that one of the challenges observed by the Ministry was that there may be inadequate space to comply with recommendations made at private schools. Expansion tends to be a challenge at these schools.

School Closures

- xxiii. For the past year, the Ministry of Health did not close any schools.

Public Complaints

- xxiv. The County Medical Office of Health is where people would make complaints of any nature related to public health.
- xxv. If there are concerns about schools, persons can visit the CMOH office or call to make complaints. Complaints are generally made by telephone or via walk in.
- xxvi. Public awareness, regarding making complaints are usually done via social media or on the Ministry of Health's website.

The following are the main themes arising from discussions with the **Tobago House of Assembly- Division of Education, Research and Technology**

Number of ECCE Centres

- xv. There are 12 Government and Government-Assisted Centres. The THA-DERTech estimates forty-three (43) private ECCE centres.
- xvi. DERTech's representatives stated that The Ministry of Education would have more information of the number of registered private schools.

Challenges with Compliance

- xvii. DERTech stated that they did not have the "legal teeth" to ensure compliance at the private ECCE centres.
- xviii. It was stated that it was difficult to enforce or ask any information from private ECCE centres given that they know that ECCE is not included in the Education Act. The private centres refuse to give any information to the Division as they are not legally bound to provide said information.

Policy and Legislative Drafting

- xix. DERTech stated that no consultations were held between themselves and the Ministry of Education regarding the formulation of policy to include the different cultural circumstances in Tobago.
- xx. The Division of Education, Research and Technology was not listed as one of the regulatory bodies for preliminary inspections.
- xxi. Cultural differences were reiterated as a difference that needs to be considered for any policy document.

Provision of Special Needs Education and Support

- xxii. DERTech stated there were no special needs teachers assigned to early childhood centres.
- xxiii. While the Student Support Services is now extending their branch into early childhood to a small degree, they were severely understaffed.
- xxiv. To accommodate this, teacher administrators were encouraged to be trained via the TRHA to identify "red flags" in educational development amongst the student population.
- xxv. There are two institutions where students can be directed to: the Child and Adolescent Centre where there are speech and language psychologists, as well as the Scarborough Hospital.

Curriculum

- xxvi. DERTech stated that while there is a national curriculum guide, it is not standardized as it is not detailed as to how a teacher should prepare lessons.
- xxvii. It was stated that they did not believe that many private instructors are qualified to interpret the curriculum guide.

- xxviii. DERTech offers regular training and workshops to break down the guide so teachers can understand how to formulate lesson plans.

Required Resources

- xxix. DERTech identified gaps in human resource, monitoring and evaluation as well as legal gaps in relation to ECCE in Tobago. However, officials stated that DERTech did not receive the type of allocation that would assist in closing the gaps identified.
- xxx. There is also a need for special needs teachers.
- xxxi. Proposals have been forwarded for an increase in budget for all levels of the education sector starting from the ECCE level.
- xxxii. DERTech stated that there is need for better communication with the Ministry of Education.

The following are the main themes arising from discussions with the **National Maintenance Training and Security Company Limited (MTS)**

Ongoing Projects

- i. For the period under discussion (2023/2024) MTS received fifty-nine (59) requests from the Ministry of Education.
- ii. MTS had submitted all fifty-nine (59) scopes and cost to the Ministry of Education and have received approval for thirty-eight (38) schools, leaving twenty-one (21) pending.
- iii. MTS have completed work on thirty-two (32) schools and six (6) are outstanding.

Outstanding Fees

- iv. With respect to ECCE Centres, approximately \$20 million in fees is outstanding to MTS;
- v. Most of the debts were accumulated prior to 2023. Factors contributing to the debt includes COVID-19 and prior years when there was some recessionary issues in the economy.
- vi. MTS did not receive a subvention from the government. As a result, they require funding from their clients to pay salaries and to operationalize the organization.
- vii. MTS provides services for thirty-four (34) out of the one hundred and forty-three (143) ECCE centres.

Recommendations by the MTS

- viii. MTS has recommended that electronic security be provided to complement the manpower at the ECCEs.

ADJOURNMENT

10.2 The meeting was adjourned accordingly at 12:29 p.m.

I certify that these Minutes are true and correct.

Chairman

Secretary

November 14, 2023

Appendix IV – Verbatim Notes of 16th Meeting

VERBATIM NOTES OF THE SIXTEENTH VIRTUAL MEETING OF THE JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION HELD (IN PUBLIC) ON WEDNESDAY, MARCH 15 2023, AT 10.15 A.M.

PRESENT

| | |
|--------------------|---------------------|
| Dr. Paul Richards | Chairman |
| Mr. Esmond Forde | Vice-Chairman |
| Mr. David Nakhid | Member |
| Mr. Avinash Singh | Member |
| Mr. Rohan Sinanan | Member |
| Ms. Vandana Mohit | Member |
| Mr. Julien Ogilvie | Secretary |
| Mr. Brian Lucio | Assistant Secretary |

ABSENT

| | |
|----------------------|---------------------------|
| Ms. Penelope Beckles | Member [<i>Excused</i>] |
| Mr. Roger Monroe | Member [<i>Excused</i>] |

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

| | |
|------------------------|-------------------------|
| Dr. Peter Smith | Chief Education Officer |
| Ms. Carol Bhagwandin | Director, ECCE |
| Ms. Michelle Collins | Research Officer |
| Ms. Susan Gopaul | SERVOL ECCE Consultant |
| Ms. Elizabeth Courtney | SERVOL Coordinator |

CHILDREN’S AUTHORITY OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

| | |
|----------------------|--|
| Mrs. Elizabeth Lewis | Deputy Director- Legal & Regulatory Services (AG.) |
| Mr. Marlon Bascombe | Manager- Investigation & Intervention Unit- North East |

**TOBAGO HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY
DIVISION OF EDUCATION, RESEARCH AND TECHNOLOGY**

| | |
|-------------------------|-------------------|
| Ms. Ann Second | Technical Advisor |
| Ms. Loraine George-Edoo | ECCE Manager |

Mr. Chairman: Good morning and welcome to the viewing and listening audience to this the Sixteenth Meeting of the Joint Select Committee on Social Services and Public Administration. This is the Committee’s first hearing with stakeholders pursuant to its examination of the regulation and administration of public and private early childhood care and education institutions in Trinidad and Tobago.

Members of the public are invited to submit their comments and questions via the Parliament’s social media platforms, YouTube channel, *ParlView*, or via Facebook or Twitter.

The stakeholders before us today include one, the Ministry of Education, two, the Children’s Authority of Trinidad and Tobago, and three, the Tobago House of Assembly, Division of Education Research and Technology. I am the Committee’s Chairman, Paul Richards; I would like to invite my colleagues from the Committee to introduce themselves starting with member Nakhid.

[Introductions made]

Mr. Chairman: Member Sinanan? *[Technical difficulty]* Member Sinanan is with us, he may be having some technical issues. Member Forde who is also here and member Mohit who is also here. And there are two members who are not with us

for reasons that they had previous engagements are—

Mr. Forde: I am here. I am here.

Mr. Chairman: Go ahead member Forde, sorry.

[Introduction made]

Mr. Chairman: Members, Minister Penelope Beckles, and also member Monroe are unable to be with us today. We thank you for joining us and of course, we thank our Secretariat for their continuous support.

The enquiry today has three main objectives.

1. To assess the regulatory framework which governs the early childhood care and educational institutions in Trinidad and Tobago.
2. To assess the performance of ECCE centres for the period 2017-2022 inclusive of systems implemented to combat learning lost experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.
3. To assess the health and safety compliance of ECCE centres, and;
4. To assess the ECCE curriculum in relation to preparation of children for primary school.

Of course, we are looking at both public and private ECCE centres in Trinidad and Tobago. We have three entities before us today. We will start with the first entity the Ministry of Education. Can the lead please introduce yourself and your team? And you can also deliver a two-minute opening remarks this time. Education Ministry.

[Introductions made]

Dr. Smith: So I will proceed with my opening now, Chair. Chairman, members of the JSC, representatives of Servol, THA, and Children's Authority, members of the public, from birth to age five a child's brain develops more and more rapidly than any other time in life, and while genetics play an important role, scientific research has made it clear that the quality of a child's experiences in the first few years of

life, positive or negative shapes how their brain develops. These experiences have lasting impact on their health and ability to learn and succeed in school and in life. This echoes UNICEF's position that quality pre-primary education is the foundation of a child's journey. Every stage of education that follows relies on its success.

The Ministry of Education is aware of these developments, and hence from a modest pilot project which began in La Pastora Community Centre in Santa Cruz in 1970, the ECCE sector has grown to 143 centres in Trinidad, 12 in Tobago, 57 centres managed by Servol, and approximately 631 private institutions. It is envisioned that the amendment to the Education Act would provide greater governance of the ECCE sector, which would ensure adherence to the provision of quality services.

The Ministry of Education is committed to the provision of high quality early childhood care and services in partnership with Servol and the various denominational boards. Visits to such centres reveal facilities that are well secured and maintained, outfitted with age-appropriate teaching and learning materials, furniture, restrooms, and large spaces that admit natural light and air. It is through play children are provided with opportunities to explore, problem solve, engage in critical thinking, as well as the development of many other skills, attitudes, and dispositions. All of this is fostered through a strong community spirit.

The Ministry of Education takes this opportunity to thank the Committee for its examination of the state of the regulation and administration of the public and private early childhood institutions in Trinidad and Tobago, and looks forward to the questions. Thank you very much, Chair.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much Dr. Smith. We move now to the officials from the Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago. My understanding is that Mrs. Elizabeth Lewis, Deputy Director Legal and Regulatory Services (Ag.) will deliver the opening remarks and introduce her team. Mrs. Lewis.

[Introductions made]

Mrs. Lewis: Good morning Chair, good morning members of the committee, good morning to the members of the THA, a very good morning again to members of the Ministry of Education, good morning to the viewing and listening public. As indicated, I am here representing the Director, who is unavoidably absent. With me, is Mr. Marlon Bascombe who is going to be able to answer questions by the JSC.

As the Children's Authority, we are very pleased to be a part of this discussion having the responsibility for dealing with the nation's children; ECCE is certainly part of the wider scope of children. And so the Children's Authority is looking forward to that engagement and improving the lives of children in Trinidad and Tobago. Thank you very much.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much, Mrs. Lewis. We move now to the officials of the Tobago House of Assembly - Division of Education, Research and Technology. I am presuming that Ms. Ann Second may be the person speaking as lead? Is that accurate?

Ms. Second: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Chairman: You are still muted. Assembly, you are muted. Tobago House of Assembly, you are muted. Can the person who is acting as lead go ahead please?

Ms. Second: Yes, good morning, quite sorry about that. Yes, so and on behalf of the Tobago House of Assembly - Division of Education, Research and Technology, we are extremely pleased to be here to partner with all the stakeholders as we discuss the way forward with the regulations and the administration of public and private early childhood institutions in Trinidad and Tobago.

As our colleagues from the Ministry had indicated, we are quite ready to have the discussions and make reference to any questions that you have to clarify anything. Our primary concern would be the finalization —finalizing of the process of regularizing the ECCE teachers and including them into that Education Act, because without it and the process began since 2005, without it we do not have the teeth that

we need to regularize, particularly, the private institutions. And that is how it is in Tobago in particular. So, we are really happy to be here and participate in the discussions. My colleague with me is the ECCE Manager, Mrs. Lorraine George-Edoo and I will allow her to just introduce herself.

[Introduction made]

Mr. Chairman: Thank you all, welcome once again. We will start our questioning with the Ministry of Education, we will then go to the Children's Authority, and we will also be questioning the colleagues from Tobago.

Let me start with the Education Ministry and Dr. Smith, one of the issues, one of the reasons, we wanted this enquiry is because children who fall into the category of early childhood defined from birth to eight years old, are among the most vulnerable in society. Doing research for this enquiry, there had been white and green papers and policy documents, drafted policy documents, from as early as the early 90s, 2000, '04, '05 iterations in 2012, 2013, 2014. But we are still absent of specific legislation to deal with the regulation of early childhood centres in Trinidad and Tobago.

Dr. Smith indicated earlier on I think, 114 centres—government centres in Trinidad, 12 in Tobago, and 631 privately run and public-private partnership early childhood care centres throughout Trinidad and Tobago without the legal regulatory framework in place that should be adhered to, to protect and maintain standards.

So I know it is in process. The Ministry's submission, Dr. Smith, indicated that had the Chief Parliamentary Counsel, CPC, with support from the Legal Unit was in the process of amending the Education Act with a view to creating comprehensive legal framework for the governance of the entire education sector, including ECCE. Given the Ministry has indicated the pace of the revision of the Education Act has hindered the Ministry in implementing initiatives, what is status of the

amendments with specific reference to the governance of early childhood care centres in Trinidad and Tobago?

Dr. Smith: Thank you very much, Chair. At this point in time, the Ministry of Education is in constant contact with AG's office and we are seeing light at the end of the tunnel, to use that phrase. We do expect that that document will be finalized sooner rather than later.

Mr. Chairman: You used two euphemisms there that told me nothing, with the greatest of respect. Light at the end of the tunnel could be a very long tunnel and soonest means absolutely nothing in the context of delivery of a particular project. Could you be more specific please?

Dr. Smith: Okay, so as I indicated, we are in touch with the AG's office, Chair, and we do anticipate the finalization and submission of that document. In terms of the specific time frame, I am unable to give you that at this point in time.

Mr. Chairman: Do you get a sense it is this year, next year, given the importance of this kind of legislation in the governance of and maintenance of standards where a very vulnerable group is concerned? You indicated in your opening that there are 631 private public partnership centres and private centres, 114 government centres in Trinidad, and 12 in Tobago. And let me just go a bit further in terms of your submission. The Education Ministry's centre existing and plan together with the private providers cater for approximately 33,226 three to four-year-old children, 33,000.

So without—for the academic year 2013-2014 a total of 30,884 children were enrolled in the ECCE sector, and in 2011 the national census put three to four age group population at almost 40,000, specifically, 38,131 children. And as you would know, without the governance it is more difficult to regulate the standards that apply to that vulnerable group. So is there a time line envisioned, an envisioned time line when this legislation or the amendment to the legislation would come to provide

stronger legislative teeth to protecting these children?

Dr. Smith: So Chair, we do anticipate the finalization of that document this year.

Mr. Chairman: This year?

Dr. Smith: This year.

Mr. Chairman: “Oooh, I had to work to get dat boy, wow.” Thank you. Next question. You indicated in your opening that the Ministry visits the centres to ensure that there is compliance of some level even with the present framework in place under the Education Act, governed by the Education Ministry to monitor standards of care et cetera. How many of these centres have been visited? When have they been visited? And is there a schedule for visits of these centres, government run and also private centres, because 631 is a lot? Plus—

Dr. Smith: So Chair, I will ask the Director of ECCE, Ms. Carol Bhagwandin, to respond.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you.

Ms. Bhagwandin: Good morning again, Chair. So our government government-assisted centres, they are monitored by an assigned administrator. That person would check on those centres on a daily basis. We also have field officers assigned to the Servol centres. As for the private centres, most of these centres are run from person’s private homes. As such, we reach out to persons and once they are willing to allow to visit their private homes where their centres are being managed, we go in and we lend support, reference to curriculum delivery. If we may see anything pertaining to the standards, the quality of standards, we provide guidance, so as to bring them up to that quality existence.

Mr. Chairman: All right, so just for my clarity, and the members of the public, is it that these private centres are mandated to be registered? How do they come into existence?

Ms. Bhagwandin: Yes. Centres are in keeping with that Education Act. They are

required—providers are required to register their centres with the Ministry of Education. However, over the past, we have noticed that persons—centres are popping up without being registered and hence the reason we are in the process of addressing same.

Mr. Chairman: When you say they—let us deal with the registered ones. What are the criteria for registration?

Ms. Bhagwandin: So in order to be registered, the provider must get approval from Water and Sewerage Authority, the Electrical Inspectorate from the Public Utilities Commission, Trinidad and Tobago Fire Services, the Regional Health Authority, and Ministry of Planning and Development, Town and Country Planning Division. They then submit their approvals to the Ministry of Education, personnel from the Ministry of Education will go in, inspect the premises, once they are in compliance, they are issued a registration certificate.

Mr. Chairman: And those are the statutory requirements. Are there training, qualification and educational level and medical professional on site requirements because you are dealing with children for those centres to be registered by the Education Ministry to ensure that the children under their care are receiving a particular standard of care?

Ms. Bhagwandin: Yes. Persons must meet the qualification standards. However, at this time we are taking steps to tighten that even further by reviewing our guidelines for registration of ECCE—private institutions, sorry, throughout the country, and we would be willing to submit more information in writing once you approve.

Mr. Chairman: What are the general criteria for persons work in these centres?

Ms. Bhagwandin: I would ask the research officer at this time to respond to this question.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you so much.

Ms. Collins: Good morning, Chair. In terms of the general requirements we do ask

that persons in these private institutions have trained and qualified persons. And when we say trained and qualified we mean that they have gotten certificate in early childhood care and education from an accredited tertiary institution. In terms of health—sorry.

Mr. Chairman: So you said you “ask for it.” Is it mandatory for their registration? Because asking for it is one thing.

Ms. Collins: Yes. That is required for their registration process. In terms of health requirements, we do not have health requirements in terms of persons needing to have first aid qualifications that kind of thing, but we do work in partnership with the Ministry of Health. If we see that there are—or public health rather if there are schools that are not meeting basic quality standards in terms of the health aspect, and they would actually go in with us do a site visit and public health will then make recommendations to the private institutions that they will then have to comply with.

Mr. Chairman: Are there any health requirements at all? Because earlier on I read that there are 40,000 or so children who meet the criteria for early childhood care in Trinidad and Tobago from these centres, 600-plus are private institutions. And we all know how prone children are to medical emergencies sometimes and challenges.

Ms. Collins: “Um-hmm.”

Mr. Chairman: What happens if there is an emergency at a centre where there is no qualified health person or no protocol in place to respond quickly to that to save that child’s life if the child’s life is threatened?

Ms. Collins: Can you repeat your question please, Chair.

Mr. Chairman: The question is, in the absence of having a mandatory, trained healthcare professional on site at some of these childhood care centres as part of their registration requirement, what happens if there is a medical emergency with a child at these centres? What is the Ministry’s guidelines where that is concerned in the absence of having a mandatory healthcare professional on site?

Ms. Collins: We do have within our policy document—we do have an aspect that speaks to health and safety. And so, all schools must have a policy, in terms of policy, procedures that they will have in place if there is a medical emergency. For example, if a child has an issue they know—the teachers and owners of the school know that they must contact the parent immediately. If is something that requires ambulance or other emergency services, contact the ambulance service, notify the parent, a teacher will go with the child. So all of that is actually within our standards for regulating early childhood care and education under health and safety.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. Earlier on, Dr. Smith indicated, or it could be your other colleague, that the centres that—I am paraphrasing here—allow you access to inspect are inspected. That suggests to me that because of the lack of the regulatory framework with the legislation that they do not have to allow you access. What happens if you are denied access to peruse and inspect the premises to ensure compliance and standards?

Ms. Bhagwandin: Chair, I will take that question if you may.

Mr. Chairman: Please.

Ms. Bhagwandin: So in a case like that we reach out to the Ministry of Health so that we could get the public health inspectors to go into the premises. Because again—

Mr. Chairman: Has that happened?

Ms. Bhagwandin: Yes, we have seen it happen on many occasions.

Mr. Chairman: And in terms of the issue you raised earlier on where you said there are more centres popping up that are not registered, and we can assume that they may not be complaint at some level, what happens where those are concerned? What is the Ministry's response?

Ms. Bhagwandin: Again, we make contact with them because we have a good

networking going on where persons would communicate to us if they see such centres. We do our research on our database so that we will know whether or not the centres are registered, and we reach out to the private providers and educate them as per the importance of having their centres registered.

Mr. Chairman: Based on your inspections, you say you inspect regularly the centres that you have identified earlier on. What is your biggest or what are your biggest concerns based on what you have seen as issues that are most prominent that may pose a risk to children at these centres? What are the issues that you may have identified that keep coming up earlier and earlier that we should be concerned about and really vigilant about?

Ms. Bhagwandin: Chair, I may ask for clarity here because I mentioned our public government/government-assisted, and Servol centres are monitored regularly. However, it is not as regular with the private institutions. Which do you refer?

Mr. Chairman: Okay. Let us start with the private institutions because those are the ones to me that will have less of compliance tendency, if I may be so bold.

Ms. Bhagwandin: It may vary; sometimes we see inadequate toilets for the children. So, for example at our government/government-assisted Servol centres when you visit those centres the washrooms would be a one to 10 ratio. Every one child-sized washroom is to be used by 10 children. Adults and children not supposed to be using the same washrooms so you will also have for adults. At the private institutions, we do not see that. Sometimes lighting may be poor. Again, qualification and the high turnover of staffing within those centres are some of the commonalities we see running across when we visit centres.

Mr. Chairman: And the government-assisted or government partnership centres what are some of the challenges you see there?

Ms. Bhagwandin: I would say not really say challenges, but we always have room for improvement in keeping with best practice. So it may be based on—because we

follow the same requirements and we follow the standards. So sometimes, it may just be some of the materials. We may need to switch out the materials that are currently being used, because the children may have perfected those materials. So again, switching out of materials, the way—sometimes how a particular activity or activities within the curriculum are delivered. But is not really challenges per se, but always areas for improvement and modification.

Mr. Chairman: Just before I open the floor to my colleagues on the Committee, is there a risk management system in place to prioritize the schools? You identified that the private schools are the ones that sometimes have the concerns from the Ministry's perspective. So with these 631 centres, I think it is that, yes 631 public-private partnership centres and the Servol centres, is there a risk management protocol that the Ministry has to say, well, we visited 400 and we have red-flagged 20 for more regular checks or for higher risk management intervention where that is concerned?

Ms. Bhagwandin: I will refer this question to my research officer who is the champion leading this type of data for centres.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you.

Ms. Collins: Chair, at this time there is not a risk management intervention but we are always supporting the private centres in terms of training, ensuring that they understand the various policies as it relates to the Ministry of Education, with reference to quality standards and the curriculum. As we move forward, the Ministry of Education is currently working with the private institutions as it pertains to the registration of their centres. And this is definitely something that I am taking a note of because I think it would be something that will be beneficial in terms of ensuring that they reach the quality standards that we expect them to.

Mr. Chairman: So you are saying you are going to—

Ms. Collins: Yes.

Mr. Chairman: —design a risk management protocol?

Ms. Collins: Yes. That is the aim coming out of the registration drive in terms of the long term because part of the monitoring and evaluation procedure that we want to implement, this should be a part of that if we are to ensure that all centres are meeting quality standards.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. Members, any members, member Singh, Forde, Sinanan, Nakhid, the floor is open to your questions. Have there been any centres shut down from the Ministry because of lack of compliance or an unwillingness to be compliant or posing risks to their cares?

Ms. Bhagwandin: The public health inspectorate is responsible for shutting down centres for not meeting health and safety standards. At this time we at that the Ministry of Education we do not shut down centres.

Mr. Chairman: Are you aware of any centres that have been shut down?

Ms. Bhagwandin: Pardon?

Mr. Chairman: Are you aware of any centres because I am sure they bring it to your attention?

Ms. Bhagwandin: In the past, not recently, but in the years gone by, yes.

Mr. Chairman: Okay. Member Nakhid, any questions?

Mr. Nakhid: Good morning, yes, I do have one question. It is related, of course, the Ministry of Education because the Children's Authority they have come and lamented the fact that section 5 has not been proclaimed and they are unable to monitor these childhood care centres. I am asking: Does that fall under the purview of the Ministry of Education to monitor? Since the section 5 Act has not been proclaimed yet and that excludes the Children's Authority from monitoring those childhood care centres, does that fall within the purview of the Ministry of Education to monitor, be careful of that word "monitor" before something actually takes place? Does that fall under the purview of the Ministry of Education?

Ms. Bhagwandin: Good morning, Mr. Nakhid so, Ministry of Education—

Mr. Nakhid: Good morning.

Ms. Bhagwandin: —is responsible for monitoring early childhood centres. So, catering for children three to five.

Mr. Nakhid: And how often are those childhood care centres monitored by the Ministry of Education since we have had numerous complaints?

Ms. Bhagwandin: Earlier on, I made mention of our government/government-assisted centres being monitored on a daily basis by assigned centre administrators or Servol field officers as well as, ECCE officers. However, at the private level because most of the centres operate from within people's homes, we are actually going into private spaces and as such, we reach out to them and once they agree to allow us in, definitely we go in and provide guidance and the support.

Mr. Nakhid: Okay, then the natural follow up question would be: If there are complaints against a private childhood care centre, and they do not allow you entry, what is the next move?

Ms. Bhagwandin: We go to public health, the Ministry of Health through the public health inspectorate, as well as based on the nature of the report, we also get the police involved.

Mr. Nakhid: Okay, and how expeditious would that be, because we are talking probably the danger of a child. How long would that take, what does that process involve?

Ms. Bhagwandin: Not long at all Sir. As recent as 2020, we had a very major incident where within a day we had all parties involved and engaged in an investigation.

Mr. Chairman: Without calling the name of the institution, what kind of incident would that be?

Ms. Bhagwandin: Death of a child.

Mr. Chairman: At a private health care centre?

Ms. Bhagwandin: Yes.

Mr. Chairman: And what was the response? Because is it something that was publicized or, is it something or—I think I remember something recently at a pool situation, would that be the one you are referring to?

Ms. Bhagwandin: Yes Sir, it was.

Mr. Chairman: And with that said, would that centre have been visited before to ensure that the surroundings was safe for a child?

Ms. Bhagwandin: Prior to, we did not know of the existence because it was an unregistered institution.

Mr. Chairman: So those are the ones that have the greatest risks, obviously?

Ms. Bhagwandin: Most definitely.

Mr. Chairman: Would you have a sense of how many unregistered private centre there are in the country?

Ms. Bhagwandin: That is a bit [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Chairman: If they are not registered so, by nature it is difficult but you might be getting information about centres that are popping up as you indicated earlier on that need to be monitored.

Ms. Bhagwandin: We have been getting and again, we rely on the community to reach out to us as well. We publish on our social media pages and our website, the centres coming very soon, from a policy our draft document for the registration of private institutions, all of this would be public knowledge, but we rely on persons to also reach out to us because sometimes again, institutions may pop up without us knowing of their existence, so—**Mr. Chairman:** This is going to be a no brainer question. It is against the law to have an institution with children without registration with the education Ministry?

Ms. Bhagwandin: Yes, it is.

Mr. Chairman: So, what happens if an institution is taking in children? Because in some cases, people are doing it in their homes.

Ms. Bhagwandin: Yes, they are.

Mr. Chairman: So, what is the Ministry's response to that sort of scenario? It may not be advertised, it may be just someone saying:

I have a home I am looking to provide this service and make some money and I am taking 15 children in my home—which is a common practice—Aunty in the neighborhood takes children “kinda” thing—

What happens when in those sorts of scenarios, are those the reports that you are hoping for from the public?

Ms. Bhagwandin: Okay, so, Chair again, we are taking steps towards addressing those right now and we have a draft document, we are in the final stages of having it finalized and approved right now for use that would tighten up unregistered centres. Again, we continue to educate John Public about the importance of having their centres or their institutions registered and meeting those standards.

Mr. Chairman: When you say a draft document, is this the overall draft education policy paper inclusive of parameters for ECCE centre or, is this a specific document related to these unregistered centres?

Ms. Bhagwandin: A specific document tailored to the registration and operation of private educational institutions throughout the country from ECCE to secondary.

Mr. Chairman: This is an amendment to a document, it can be a new document.

Dr. Smith: So, Chair, if I may, this is a separate document which would regulate the registration of private schools, including ECCE centres.

Mr. Chairman: I ask the question because I am presuming that—is it that there is no policy document now related to the registration of ECCE centres, private?

Ms. Bhagwandin: Yes, there is.

Dr. Smith: There is Chair, but what we would have done at this point in time, is to really develop a one comprehensive document that will cater for the proper registration of schools at this time.

Mr. Chairman: That word proper bothers me. Member Singh, do you have any questions? Member Nakhid, are you complete or you have other questions?

Mr. Nakhid: One more question, Chair.

Mr. Chairman: Go ahead please.

Mr. Nakhid: Do you have any statistics, any data available as to the number of incidents that you described, with that unfortunate—the death of that infant with the pool? Do you have any statistics available? How many of those incidents occur at these unregistered private homes as opposed to those that are monitored or registered by the Ministry of Education?

Ms. Bhagwandin: Yes, only for the reported incidents, again, major reported infirmarys very low at this time. For the last academic year, we have only had two incidents on our records.

Mr. Chairman: Member Singh.

Mr. Nakhid: At the unregistered private homes, sorry, at the unregistered private homes?

Ms. Bhagwandin: Private ECCE centres.

Mr. Nakhid: The unregistered ones?

Ms. Bhagwandin: Yes, the two incidents, it would have been, those centres were unregistered.

Mr. Chairman: So, clearly, those are the points of greatest concern. Member Sinanan, I think you had a question?

Mr. Sinanan: Yes, I do, Chair, good morning all. It is illegal to have a home or a school operating that is not registered. Right? And we do understand there are several schools that operate in Trinidad and Tobago—should we not then be going on a

sort of educational campaign to parents and so, that, you know, before you decide to place your child in one of these schools or institutions that you should request to see some registration approvals or something like that, so that people can be, you know, more comfortable where they place their children? I say that because, a lot of the parents outside there may not know that the school is not registered, and maybe an educational programme to inform the parents about asking for that registration approval, before you register your child at one of these institutions. It is just a suggestion and if there is anything like that in place?

Mr. Chairman: Just to add to member Sinanan's point. Is there a requirement for a display of a registration document by these private institutions?

Mr. Sinanan: Yes Chair, exactly.

Ms. Bhagwandin: Yes to both questions. Yes, your registration certificate must be displayed in a prominent location. And yes, we have tips for parents, what to look for when you are registering your child at any institution. So we definitely have both available but again, as we go forward in the year, we are going to see us again once more revising and having more strategies in place to educate parents about what to look for when you are registering your child at an institution.

Mr. Chairman: I have just two comments coming in from the public? Member Sinanan, you have a question? Go ahead please.

Mr. Sinanan: Yeah, just as a suggestion, sometimes we do have a policy and a procedure, but not all the time it is actually communicated to the people who need to get information. I would suggest that you go on a drive, a more stringent drive to educate the parents and the population about what to look for, because I am certain that a lot of parents will look for the opportunity to place a child closer to home, somewhere where it is convenient and that whole thought of that registration and so, slips through. And maybe what you should have on your registration display is also a number that they can call to verify that these certificates are authentic, and the

school is actually, you know, up to date based on your last inspection and so. So the public can call your authority and get information before they make that crucial decision or critical decision as to, I am going to send my child to this institution, just a suggestion. Thank you.

Ms. Bhagwandin: Yes Sir, all of that in place as we move forward, and roll out before the start of the new academic year.

Mr. Chairman: Member Singh.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Chairman, good morning to members of the Ministry of Education, good morning, colleagues. I have a question in relation to this incident that we have been seeing. I just want to digress for a couple seconds. But it is a real challenge for me living in central and I am seeing a lot of non-national children, you know, which fall in the category of the three to five years that are not in school. Do we have any statistics of non-national children that are enrolled or should be enrolled, or what is the policy regarding these children that for some reason, they are not in schools—I do not know, what is the policy with respect to non-nationals being in ECCE centres?

Dr. Smith: So good morning, Mr. Singh and what you will have to do, if permitted, please allow us to submit a written response to your question because that element falls outside of just the Ministry of Education, it also involves the immigration authorities. And your concern is definitely noted.

Mr. Singh: Thank you Chair, I am comfortable with that and I am—the reason I am bringing that up, you know, is because education starts at home and when children are not in schools, I mean, they—let me just give you an example. I went to my garden recently and I actually saw some children, they are probably no older than three years, four years old, and they were actually picking my, you know, picking fruits and whatnot. So, definitely they are, they are around and they can find themselves in activities which you know, when you are taught to—when you bring

home a pencil that does not belong to you, in my opinion, that is where the criminal element starts when you are told well, you can go by the neighbour and pick their mangoes without asking. And this is a real challenge coming from Central Trinidad that I am seeing more children on the streets that are not, you know, gainfully in academic facilities. So, I take that on board Chairman, but it is a real issue that we have to also consider. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you so much. Member Ford. While member Ford comes back on I just got two messages, Education Ministry, from members of the public looking on. One, is regarding a report made by someone about a private early childhood care centre, which is at a—what they consider a dangerous location at an intersection. And it is not unique because I have seen them myself moving around and they indicated that this is a registered private institution that had gotten approval at a busy intersection and two, another one, related to a centre catering for about 25-27 children, with one bathroom which was reported and it is still operating two years later. So, what is the response to those scenarios?

Ms. Bhagwandin: Chair, we would have to do some more investigation reference to the private centre that would have been—that is operating at the intersection. What we are also finding is in during the registration process, it is indicated that relocation nullifies your registration status. However, what we are seeing is persons relocating without reregistering, because again, when you get approval from WASA, Town and Country, electrical inspectorate, fire services et cetera, it is for that specific location, but again, persons are relocating without re. having their centres reassessed. So, that is one area we are also looking at. As per the second point raised, with the one washroom and the one for the persons to use, we are asking that persons submit to us via ecce@moe.gov.tt your complaint and again, it will be investigated.

Mr. Chairman: Just before we move to the Children’s Authority final question, unless the Committee members have any other questions for education Ministry, you said:

You are seeing—which means it has been documented—situations where centres are changing locations without authorization given their first registration approvals.

But you indicated earlier on that there was only one centre or couple of centres shut down. So, how can the centres that have come to your knowledge that have moved to locations unapproved continue under those circumstances and if centres—secondly, centres are moving location without authorization, what is in place for personnel changes at centres that do not fall within the criteria of qualified persons changing and also, not informing the education Ministry and becoming uncompliant compared to when they first registered with John Doe, Ms. Doe, X Doe, as employees who are qualified et cetera. What is the monitoring process for those changes, those dynamic changes within centres that may be registered and qualified at one stage, but their circumstances are changed without advising the education Ministry?

Ms. Bhagwandin: So, once we are made aware, we reach out we provide that technical support to have the issues addressed that may have been raised. So again, we continue to reach out to private providers, we continue to stress the importance of sticking within the required guidelines. But again, public health is definitely involved in that aspect of it for getting them when they get a compliance notice, personnel would go back and check on the institutions but currently as it is, public health inspectors would be the ones to say okay, your doors must be closed for non-compliance at this time.

Mr. Chairman: Is the Ministry generally comfortable with the level of compliance of private ECCE centres in Trinidad and operating within safe parameters?

Ms. Bhagwandin: To a fair extent.

Mr. Chairman: What does that mean?

Ms. Bhagwandin: Approximately, if we want to really quantify we could say approximately—it could be approximately, and again, this is a guesstimate about 50/50 or persons in total compliance—

Mr. Chairman: So, approximately 50 per cent are compliant.

Ms. Bhagwandin: Yes.

Mr. Chairman: That is of great concern to me.

Ms. Bhagwandin: Yes, it is.

Mr. Chairman: That means about 20,000 children are in centres that maybe un-compliant and unsafe. That is not the benchmark we should be operating at but that is for a different discussion. Member Nakhid, thank you education Ministry we appreciate your information.

Ms. Bhagwandin: Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Member Nakhid, go ahead with the Children's Authority, please.

Mr. Nakhid: Yes, Chair, but can I pose one more question please to the Ministry of Education?

Mr. Chairman: Absolutely go ahead please, yes.

Mr. Nakhid: If—I do not know what is missing, but I understand from the Chair, and member Sinanan and yourselves, your good selves that it is illegal to have these early childhood care centres unregistered. I heard the word illegal. So, the question has to be: Once they have been identified as being unregistered, how long does it take for these centres to be closed down and these people charged, if it is illegal? I do not know if I am missing something here, maybe you can clarify.

Ms. Bhagwandin: Mr. Nakhid, that is within the Education Act that, yes, all institutions providing educational services must be registered. Again, centres are popping up without being registered. At this time, it is not within the purview of the Ministry of Education to shut them down but with the public health inspectorate it once it is

brought to our attention and we visit et cetera, violations, we get public health involved.

Mr. Chairman: Do you follow up with public health to make sure these centres are shut down?

Ms. Bhagwandin: Yes.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. Member Nakhid, Children's Authority. Thank you education Ministry.

Ms. Bhagwandin: Thank you, Sir.

Mr. Nakhid: Thank you Chair. Children's Authority, good morning.

Mr. Chairman: Sorry.

Mr. Nakhid: Chair. I cannot see who I am speaking with.

Mr. Chairman: Is it Mrs. Lewis?

Mrs. Lewis: Yes Chair.

Mr. Chairman: She is on member Nakhid, go ahead.

Mr. Nakhid: Okay, now I see her. Well, before I get into the substantive part I read the responses by the Children's Authority to the questions posed. And of course, it echoes what I mentioned earlier, that it was a major lament, it seems to me a major lament of the Children's Authority that section 5 has not been proclaimed yet and that therefore, precludes you from monitoring these centres, thereby, what comes to your attention are the complaints of abuse. So, my point is, if the Children's Authority is unable because of a lack of proclamation of that Act to monitor the centres, and thereby, we can only have an intervention after an act has already been committed. I mean, how disconcerting is that to the people of Trinidad and Tobago?

Mr. Chairman: Well, member Nakhid—

Mr. Nakhid: Mrs. Lewis?

Mr. Chairman: —Mrs. Lewis cannot answer that question. You have to ask her a question based on what her remit is. She cannot answer—

Mr. Nakhid: What is being done to ensure that you are able to monitor the situation before the abuse takes place? That is the obvious question then, Mrs. Lewis.

Mrs. Lewis: Thank you for that question, member Nakhid. Just for some clarification. The Children's Authority under the section—part 5 sorry, which is sections 42 to 52 (a) of the Children's Community Residences, Foster Care and Nurseries Act 46:04, it calls for regulation, which is basically licensure or nurseries. As the Ministry of Education has rightly said they are responsible for the early childhood centres. Certainly, as you would have indicated, when we get a report as we do either for any location of a child who is a victim of abuse, we take it through our normal process. So, it goes in, it is investigated, a decision is made with respect to whether the child can remain in the space where the abuse is taking place and, if there is need for us to receive that child into care, and of course, moving forward into the involvement of the court.

With respect to our prevention, we have a very public prevention programme with respect to child abuse. So, we do a number of Facebook engagements, we go out to the various places to conduct sensitizations with respect to child abuse and so, that sensitization is aimed at everybody, including early childhood centres.

Mr. Nakhid: I appreciate that Mrs. Lewis, but as we know, the bureaucratic nature of any Ministry, under any administration, I think the Children's Authority would be primarily placed. I mean, I know, through my research that they are investigative units, I think the Children's Authority will be primarily placed putting aside the bureaucracy to so to speak, to better monitor these situations before the event actually occurs. I mean, you are talking about children between three and six, and so forth that could be life ending, psychological trauma that could be take years to heal. So, we what we are looking for is preventative measures before the incident takes place. And I understand the bureaucracy of a Ministry. So, my question to you is: Would

not the Children's Authority be better placed to monitor the situation before the actual abuse takes place?

Mrs. Lewis: Member Nakhid, the Children's Authority would deal with children who are victims of abuse and neglect. Children who attend early childhood centres are not considered unless we get a report of action taken against a child, these are normal children attending regular [Inaudible]. So, it could be early childhood centre, it could be a primary school, it could be a secondary, these are children attending normal school. And so, with respect to the role of the Children's Authority, I would want us to be mindful that the Children's Authority cannot just go in, I mean, if we were invited, we go in and provide sensitization. But in terms of the monitoring, I would be quite concerned if the Children's Authority coming to monitor, you know, children who are not children of the State, who have been received into State care, which is different to children who are in children's homes. Children in children's homes are children received into State care for a situation of abuse, and they had to be removed. And so, the Authority must and will and are monitoring those children, but from the early childhood centres and I think Minister of Education would have clearly indicated they are responsible for the monitoring and as far as I heard, they are doing that.

11.15 a.m.

Mr. Nakhid: Well, I know I have placed you in a difficult position to answer but, to me, I do not think that answer would be satisfactory to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. I know the Ministry of Education has their job, but are you saying, therefore, that children at three to six are not as much at risk of abuse? Because I heard you said that at three to six, there may not be so many—you said something that alluded to that there may not be so many incidents at that age? Is that what you said?

Mrs. Lewis: Certainly not member Nakhid. What I am saying is, it is a regular—

Early Childhood Centres are regular educational facilities. And, just as I said, indicated earlier, in fact, like I said a primary school or a secondary school. So, these are children attending schooling at their level. And so, for the Children's Authority to be given that responsibility, it can be stretched so that the Children's Authority probably be given that same responsibility for primary and secondary schools.

So, we are looking at the legislation, the draft legislation, in respect of that, at this point, to determine where the responsibility of the Children's Authority begins and ends. The legislation speaks to—and nurseries would be different to Early Childhood Centres. So nurseries would cover both two and three years—these are young children, babies—and this was really the intention of the legislation to focus on that core group of children who, I mean, it is well known, they are highly susceptible to abuse and neglect.

Mr. Nakhid: Okay, Mrs Lewis, well, let me get into a substantive questioning. Your submission mentioned that the Nursery Gap Analysis Project was suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and subsequent privileges of nurseries and it is to be revisited. Do you have any idea when will this project be revisited or resumed?

Mrs. Lewis: Unfortunately, not at this time member Nakhid. We were quite advanced, nonetheless, in the research that we were doing, because we wanted to get an understanding of what was out there. Because again of that same confusion with nurseries as opposed to Early Childhood Care Centres. We would have started in November COVID, of course, you know, what happened with COVID in 2020. We have done, nonetheless, a preliminary report that speaks to some of what we would have found at this point. But to answer your question, directly, we do not have a said date at which time we are going to continue with the research that was started.

Mr. Nakhid: Mrs. Lewis, your submission indicated that when children under six are removed from the custody of their parents, there may be delays in placement in a school due to the need of a transfer. How long on average does it take for a transfer

to be finalized?

Mrs. Lewis: Member Nakhid, if I may, I will ask my colleague, Mr. Bascombe to respond to this question.

Mr. Nakhid: Thank you.

Mr. Bascombe: Good morning, member Nakhid and everyone else on the panel.

Mr. Nakhid: Good morning.

Mr. Bascombe: It may vary vastly in terms of the transfer process depending on the area of Trinidad and Tobago. So, but on average, it could take anywhere between three weeks to about six weeks to have that transfer completed.

Mr. Nakhid: And that length time, is it because of the bureaucracy involved, papers being transferred? Why is it so long?

Mr. Bascombe: Well, different things. Sometimes in the course of the school transfer, some of the documentation that may be needed from the child's family may not be available—that may include birth certificates, that may include immunization records or other health records—and so on and so some of the delay would be us at the Authority seeking to get those documents or to duplicate those documents if they are not available. Sometimes it may involve applying again for those documents either at the Ministry of Legal Affairs or through the various health centres or at the Ministry of Health to get immunization records and so on, which the schools need to have adequate records of the children. A lot of the time that is the major issue other than regular bureaucracy. But, in some instances, it may be that the schools would not have space and so we may be working with the Ministry to find appropriate spaces for the children.

Mr. Nakhid: Okay. And when that happens, what quality assurance measures do you have in place to evaluate the tutorials being given to these kids?

Mr. Bascombe: My apologies, Sir? Could you repeat?

Mr. Nakhid: What quality assurance measures do you have in place to evaluate the

tutorials being given to these children?

Mr. Bascombe: At the various schools—at the Authority, we do not have those measures in place. We rely on the Ministry and their schools, in terms of their evaluation standards.

Mr. Nakhid: And how often do you get a report on that?

Mr. Bascombe: Well, on a case by case basis, there are instances where we may request information on the child depending on the nature of the case. Sometimes it would be, of course, at the end of the term. But, periodically, once we are involved in a matter, our case workers, our Children Services Associates would be dispatched to engage and speak with the various teachers at the schools, the principals and so on, to provide an overall picture in terms of what is happening with the child.

Mr. Nakhid: So, Mr. Bascombe, not casting any—I would like to know, just for clarity, so is it a reactive measure as far as knowing about these quality assurance measures or is it proactive? Do you go after the results of them, the data, or is it only if you have a report of a child being left behind or something like that?

Mr. Bascombe: I am not sure I understand.

Mr. Chairman: Member Nakhid, this is the Children's Authority. They are not reposed with the remit of curriculum and education. They are—

Mr. Nakhid: It is not about curriculum. Sorry, Chairman. It is not about the curriculum. I am just finding out if it is a proactive measure. It is not about that. Is it proactive or more reactive. Mr. Bascombe stated that if they have a report that they would investigate. So, I am asking, why is it not more proactive as to go after and make sure that the kids are getting the quality assurance measures for their tutorials? It is not about—I know they are not responsible for curriculum and that. It is just about what is the approach of the Children's Authority, because in the end, they are responsible for the children. Mr. Bascombe, if you would like to take some time to give me a written response, I have no problem.

Mrs. Lewis: Member, if I may, the question—

Mr. Chairman: Please do.

Mrs. Lewis: Thank you, Chair. If I understand well, is it that you are speaking with respect to children who have come to the attention of the Children's Authority and who the Children's Authority are seeking placement for at the schools, at the various schools?

Mr. Nakhid: That is exactly what I am referring to. Yes.

Mrs. Lewis: Okay. So, those children would have been assigned. If it is a child with the Children's Authority, infracting to be received into care, the children would be assigned what we call a CSA, the Children Services Associate which is, in effect, is really a social worker, and that person is assigned to this child to monitor what is happening with this child from various levels.

It is well understood that when a child is received into care by the Children's Authority, the ultimate goal is to place that child back into a family, either the family of origin or a family where the child feels quite comfortable. But as long as they remain in State's care, there is a social worker that is assigned who is engaging in the school, who is engaging with the parents, ensuring that the child receives the necessary counselling and interventions required.

Mr. Nakhid: Excellent. Excellent. I have one more question. Your submission noted that there is a lack of adequate and appropriate spaces for children at schools that are able to treat with their physical and/or mental presentation. Approximately how many children, under the purview of the Children's Authority, are in need of places at special needs school?

Mrs. Lewis: Mr. Bascombe, do you have that figure on hand or would we have to submit it in writing?

Mr. Bascombe: We will have to submit that in writing. I do not have it on hand at the moment. Apologies.

Mr. Chairman: Please do. Thank you.

Mr. Nakhid: No problem. Then I have time for one more question Chair, sorry.

Mr. Chairman: Please, go ahead.

Mr. Nakhid: Your submission notes that when children do not have the required school materials, Children Social Services Associates solicit donations from staff or approach NGOs or businesses to have the materials sponsored. Are these donations adequate to meet the needs of the students?

Mr. Bascombe: Member Nakhid, it would be difficult to say so, if it is completely adequate. We are definitely seeking to fill a need. So, once as staff we, you know, either pool our resources or seek resources, we are seeking to provide the materials that the child may need for that particular term—copybooks, pencils, pens and so on and so forth. And so, as needed, we continue to try too source the relevant materials and provide it to them.

Mr. Nakhid: Well, I commend you all, first of all, because I know how our teachers are very responsive to the students and they usually use their own resources. So, first of all, I commend all of you. But my question to you, does that burden upon the teachers—I mean, has that been in any way indicated to the Ministry of Education, that financial burden that is placed upon when staff may have to ante up and help with the books and with the equipment and all of that for the students? Do you indicate such to the Ministry of Education or the relevant authority?

Mr. Bascombe: I do not think we have done so formally but, in various instances, in our engagement with the various schools, they will know. The teachers and the principals would know when we ourselves are part of providing relevant materials.

Mr. Nakhid: Again, I commend you, Mr. Bascombe, Mrs. Lewis and thank you for taking my questions.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you, Member Nakhid. We have a question from the viewing

and listening audience to the Children's Authority. Is there a time frame as to instructing these institutions that one: An inspection was done and found not within the procedures and they have to shut down—and they have to shut down another building, et cetera, with all procedures in tact? Is there a time frame for that kind of transition or advice to the institution?

Mrs. Lewis: Chair, if I may respond to this question. Again, I just want to repeat the Children's Authority does not have that purview over Early Childhood Care Centres.

Mr. Chairman: Okay. I am sorry about that. I think that was for the Ministry of Education. That was my mistake. Going back to one of member Nakhid's question earlier, Mrs. Lewis, have you—and based on our conversation with the Ministry of Education, given the legal remit of the Children's Authority—received any formal information about neglect or abuse at the private or public Early Childhood Care institutions from the education Ministry in the last three to five years?

Mrs. Lewis: Chair, please permit me. I would have to seek, you know, some time to clearly research. But what I could say is that we do receive reports from a wide range from various Ministries, from agencies and from private persons. We do get those reports. As to those coming directly from the Ministry of Education, I would ask for your indulgence for us to submit that via written submission.

Mr. Chairman: That is fine. Have you at the Authority had cause to investigate reports of abuse and/or neglect at any of the private Early Childhood Care institutions in the past few years, given that the education Ministry has indicated that approximately 50 per cent—there were concerns about their operations of about 50 per cent of the private institutions and the once that may be unregistered and have not come to the attention the education Ministry. Because one would imagine that, for example, the child that died at the swimming pool scenario, years ago, may have been an issue that may have been reported to you or not. I would shudder to think

that you did not respond or not. But have there been those kinds of reports emanating from Early Childhood Care Centres either public or private to the Authority?

Mrs. Lewis: Certainly, Chair, we do receive reports of abuse of children within Early Childhood Centres.

Mr. Chairman: Are they prevalent or profound reports or are they sporadic reports?

Mrs. Lewis: At this stage Chair, I do not want to mislead anyone, so I would, again, ask for us to submit that in writing. What I could share, at this time, is that whenever a report is received, we do investigate. It goes through our normal channel. So it is documented, it is assigned. Depending on the severity of the abuse as we would have assessed, it goes through our various channel. So, it may be if it is extremely high, we send it through our emergency response team and they will conduct an initial and immediate investigation. If it is not, it goes to our Investigation and Intervention Unit of which Mr. Bascombe, right here, is a Manager for a section. They would investigate and determine the next course of action.

Mr. Chairman: Without the specificity that the data may provide, is the Authority at all concern about the unregulated nature of the Early Childhood Care sector, given the amount of reports you may or may not receive? Is there a concern there? Because you may have a general sense that more and more reports are coming are out of either neglect or abuse in the Early Childhood Care sectors in Trinidad and Tobago.

Mrs. Lewis: Chair, certainly, any report of any abuse of a child is a concern for the Authority. But even, more so, when it is coming from an Early Childhood Care Centre. And so, we too, recognize the need for us to move quickly and urgently into stringent measures and, you know, ensure that there are regulations and legislation that governs those centres as well.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. We are going to move now—that you so much Children’s Authority. We may come back to you in a short while. I am going to go to

Member Singh now and we will engage the Tobago House of Assembly Division of Education, Research and Technology. Thank you for being patient, Tobago. Member Singh, the floor is yours.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Chairman and good morning again colleagues from the THA. I want to also thank you for the quite extensive responses you would have provided to this Committee. So, in reflecting on your responses, I have a couple questions that I would pose. So, let me get into it. In terms of submission, your submission mentions that the division needs the power to register, monitor and license ECC centres in Tobago. The submission also mentioned that this process begins in Tobago. My question is: What is the average time taken to complete the registration of an ECC centre in Tobago and for the award of a licence to operate?

Ms. Second: Good morning, so Mrs. Loraine George, ECCE Manager.

Ms. George-Edoo: Good morning, Mr. Singh. I trust that you are hearing us well. So, it is quite difficult to say how long the process would take, because what happens is just the outline in the written response there, when all those agencies are given approval and the forms have been cleared for us, the School Supervision Unit would have inspections. This goes to Trinidad. After that, I do not know how long it takes. I am not sure where in Trinidad it goes and how long that process takes for someone to receive registration or licensing.

Mr. Singh: So, could I simply say that the time factor is a clear deterrent for some of these centres becoming registered?

Ms. George-Edoo: Yes, you can and they have said so, yes.

Mr. Singh: Okay. I looked at your responses to question two, Item 4 on page 2 and your submission noted that the number of unregistered, unlicensed learning institutions in Tobago is unclear. I took note of the amount of ECC centres in Tobago—12 Government, five Servol and 37 private. What I want to know is: Has the THA

made any attempts at establishing any formal communication with unregistered education and child care providers?

Ms. George-Edoo: Yes, we have. I am in this position for the last eight years and when I came into the position there was major publicity asking providers so to do. We got a few responses. After that, there was only one other call to the public asking people to come in to register and we only got a few which is before you in the written response.

Mr. Chairman: Okay.

Ms. Second: May I add?

Mr. Singh: Sure.

Ms. Second: That is part of our strategic planning process, at this time. We are at the stage of outreach to the public. So we have planned a major marketing campaign, just I believe it was—I cannot remember who mentioned it before from your Committee. We are doing a major outreach and educational development programme so that persons would have a sense of why they need to be registered and parents themselves would be more knowledgeable [*Inaudible*] to submit a registered ECC centre rather than one that is not. We want to do that education campaign across the board.

Mr. Singh: But from your experience and in dealing with the Tobago situation of these unregistered and as Sen. Nakhid would have indicated in his questioning to the other agencies, being unregistered could be viewed as being illegal. In terms of your interaction with these few persons that responded to the public call, how prevalent you would say is the issue where parents are taking their children to these unregistered facilities? How prevalent—if you want to just list it via percentage to your information, in that regard—are these unregistered facilities?

Ms. Second: It is extremely prevalent. Let me just go first and then I would allow Ms. Edoo. I also want to mention that while we were preparing for this project, the research team would have called out—we have 71 centres on record—but out of that

123 are not registered. When they were trying to gather the information from the private sectors, they were extremely disrespectful. They did not feel that the standards, because they are not ratified by law, we do not have any teeth to control them or that we have any authority whether we are saying it is legal or illegal to approach them and to demand any information from them. So they were very, very, disrespectful.

I think it is very, very, prevalent and during the COVID period, well we were not allowed to go out to formal schools, a few of them, very sporadically we touched. So, we are currently doing the research. We recently developed our research sector, and we are currently doing the research to gather the accurate information, because we intend to be data drive on our side. So, I would allow Mrs. Edoe to continue.

Ms. George-Edoo: Added to that, it would be prevalent, because you can see the small numbers of government to government assisted and Servol in Tobago compared to the private. So parents choosing the private is prevalent, because we are grossly overcrowded in the government system here in Tobago.

Mr. Singh: Okay. Thank you for that response. I would like to move to.

Mr. Chairman: Member Singh, just let me ask—

Mr. Singh: Sure.

Mr. Chairman:—what does overcrowded mean—grossly overcrowded mean?

Ms. George-Edoo: Well, all our centres are at their limit and this term, specifically, we have allowed them to go over by five because of the need.

Mr. Chairman: So, for example, how many should the centres be accommodating and how many are you actually accommodating for?

Ms. George-Edoo: Right. So we have different sizes of centres. The larger centre is 65, then we have centres for 50 and then 45.

Mr. Chairman: So, what is your overall capacity in terms of all and how many are you actually providing services for?

Ms. George-Edoo: Our overall capacity would be around 400 or 395 thereabout and we are right now at 440.

Mr. Chairman: And how is that impacting the provision of services for those children?

Ms. George-Edoo: Well, it is still very good Sir, because what principals and administrators have done is removed some of our shelving to create spaces so that you have movement.

Mr. Chairman: And you have the ratio of personnel to deal with this overcrowding? Because that is another issue clearly.

Ms. George-Edoo: Yes. That is one thing that DERTech has regularized very early this year, September to last year. So we are at, at least, 95 to 97 per cent fully trained staff and we are in every centre that the Government has—we have full amount of staff and still running interviews to fill the gaps.

Mr. Chairman: That is commendable. Thank you. That is commendable. Member Singh, go ahead, please.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Chairman. Regarding your proposals to have consultations and your responses in the document to the factors and challenges which hinder the successful implementation of some of these policies and initiatives, I saw in your responses you mentioned the issue of having a cultural resistance as a barrier. Could you kindly elaborate on this cultural resistance you are experiencing with regard to the successful implementation of some of the initiatives outlined in your programme?

Ms. Second: All right, so I would begin. So, why cultural resistance would reflect both internally within our division, DERTech, and externally, we would have embarked on our new strategic direction recently. So what we would have discovered was—and in any change management process you will have some form of resistance—so persons who were working very hard, but not collaborating well. That

was one of the key points of focus of our internal improvement strategy.

We are also looking at cultural resistance on the ground. If we do not have enough spaces in the government service to have children, persons are going to go to aunty down the road and aunty from church, et cetera. It is going to be downstairs. It is not going to conform to all of the regulations and the standards, but they are comfortable with their aunty. They would also be afraid of some of the standards that will control whether or not they should be able to open a centre or not. And so, they would naturally refuse. As I said, some of them were very disrespectful, because they feel they are running a private school, they are collecting their private fees and they have their particular way of doing things, et cetera.

So this why we have to make it a holistic educational programme. We have to go into the communities, talk to fishermen, talk to the churches, et cetera and let them understand what it is we are doing. We want to have greater accountability from nursery to tertiary. So, we have to teach the people why it is important for us to have increased standards across the board. That is why our emphasis is now the last part of our strategic plan, go out among the people and take this knowledge to them and get feedback from them. Our intention is to work with the people within the barriers of the culture to help them to understand why we need to improve our education system.

Mr. Singh: Thank you. Chair, just about two more questions. I saw your submission stated that some of these privately run centres are solely responsible for their own monitoring and upkeep of their facilities and non-compliance would be monitored by the respective agencies. The question is, generally: What issues have been identified by these respective government agencies that have been brought to your attention thus far?

Ms. George-Edoo: Well, pretty similar to what the Ministry would be experiencing in Trinidad. So, most of the time and it is on a case by case basis, especially, if the

issue is a health one, then the Division of Health would be called in, and most of the time that calling in is done community wise, because people would not really report to the Division of Education, because as Ms. Second was trying to—well, not trying, but explaining about our culture, that is how they understand it. They are private, so they are not Government, so we are not going to the division. If it is private, then we going to see. If it is a health problem, we go to health. If it is otherwise, they go to the relevant people to deal with it. So, hence the reason we have not had it in the last couple years in reports.

Ms. Second: Yes, and if I could just add, the same infrastructural issues—the physical, wear and tear of the building, where they are having the children and school feeding application, et cetera.

Mr. Singh: And a follow-up to that. When you all are dealing with the inspections, is the granting of access to the THA officials for the purpose of this same conducting of inspections a condition for attaining registration status in Tobago?

11.45 a.m.

Ms. George-Edoo: Yes, and little Tobago, to me it seems the private providers see a major condition, our requirement, being the school feeding. So we want the school feeding for the children they are providing for and therefore they will come in, because before us they must start the registration process. And we say start because of what I explained earlier, the channel that it has to take and how long it takes to come back to them as being registered or licenced. So we think we must start the process, meaning we got the call, you go to the government agencies, got the approvals, brought it back and we have inspected and sent off. So once they have done that then the administrator and the school feeding team, division, department will look into it and see if they will qualify, so that is one of the major things that invite them to come in and qualify.

Mr. Singh: [*Inaudible*]

Ms. George-Edoo: You are muted, you are muted. We are not hearing you.

Mr. Chairman: You are muted member Singh.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, sorry for that. Chair, my last question would be, at the monitoring side in terms of the operational ECC Centres from the THA Education Division side of things, how many of these facilities have had severe issues that the THA had to intervene, and I am not sure if closed down the facility or monitor and regulate? Have you had any instances of any of these facilities having problems and issues, or incidents in let us say the last couple of years, last three to five years and what was done?

Ms. George-Edoo: Very similar to the Ministry of Education, we cannot close down or we do not close down but we can go to the Division of Health. We have not had any such in the last five years. Privately before the five-year period we heard of one situation where the child got burnt at a place that was preschool and day care in one. So, at that centre the Division of Health went in and closed them for a while to investigate, but coming from our end, we do not close down. And then you asked about monitoring, it is similar to what the Ministry says, once they are invited, or when we have training sessions, we throw out the invitation, many times it is a very few. The numbers will show you the number of private providers and out of that number if we get five private people come in and tapping in to the training we get plenty. So they do not really invite us to monitor because they know what they are doing, but for this specific purpose that we went out, we were able to see a lot, give a lot of advice and talk to people and help them understand, and many of them were receptive.

Mr. Singh: [*Inaudible*]

Ms. George-Edoo: You are muted again.

Ms. Second: Member you are muted.

Mr. Singh: Chair, I know I said that was the last but I just have one more question

to close off my questioning.

Mr. Chairman: Go ahead.

Mr. Singh: And it has to do with the ability of the ECC curriculum and the need to be more inclusive to children with special needs. Are students with special needs currently integrated into the ECC classrooms in the government and government-assisted ECC schools in Tobago?

Ms. Second: All right, we will both answer. So, yes. One of our focus point is for the tech with our strat plan is inclusivity, so we want inclusivity from early child all the way up. The children are integrated. We have a strong student support services sector that works along with our nutrition sector to make sure that kids are diagnosed, and references are made so that we can ensure that there is a smooth seamless transition. Now there are some children, I think somebody mentioned it before, who are not instituted, they are at home. They are not registered. So, our research department, which I said is recently developing, we are going out into the communities, we are hunting these families down and we are helping to integrate them into our formal education care. But we do have kids out there who are not registered.

Mr. Singh: Okay, thank you. Thank you, Chair.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much member Singh, thank you very much Tobago for being so prepared. I want to go back to the education Ministry for just a bit. We have a question, the question earlier was really for the education Ministry, and the question is, is there a timeframe as to instructing institutions that an inspection was done and your was organization found not with in compliance, that they have to shut down or move to another building, is there a timeframe that is given to this organization to become compliant, and guidelines?

Ms. Collis: I will take the question, Chair. So in terms of notification for non-compliant institutions, we would often get those in public health, and there is a timeframe in which persons are required to get their institution up to the quality

standard or to the—and to address the needs or issues outlined in the notice from public health. As you would have mentioned—

Mr. Chairman: The other question I have and it really stuck with me, I do not want to hold you to it because you already gave me an approximation of the 600—the 50 per cent thereabouts, even if it is 40 per cent to me, 40 per cent of non-compliant in the private sector institutions is very, is of great concern. If that is the case, let us just say on the lower end it is 40 per cent that are generally non-compliant, is there an understanding or an identification by the Ministry, that as we move towards the draft policy changing the regime legislatively that these institutions will by law have to become compliant and they may be serving as much as 30,000—20,000 or more children to help provide capacity building to these institutions to move them into what will be an inevitable legislative regime that they would be mandatory?

Dr. Smith: So, Chair, as mentioned there is going to be a—it is being proposed that there will be a moratorium which would allow these institutions to really come up to standards, and even before the amendment, as was indicated the policy for the registration of private schools in Trinidad and Tobago, that policy does make and put forward specific guidelines that schools are supposed to abide by.

Mr. Chairman: But there are unregistered schools presently that are off the radar of the education Ministry and, I am presuming the Children's Authority, because they are just not on the radar. For example, the school that had the incident where the child died that was publicized about a year, a year and a half ago, and the concern about those types of institutions that are off the radar and operating, in addition to the registered ones at about 40, 50 per cent that are partially or wholly non-compliant leaves quite a significant gap for short fall and unsafe environments and unsatisfactory delivery of services. What are we doing about that in the meantime? What is the plan to get those in line even before the law comes and a moratorium has to extend substandard operations at some level and force them into compliance? There

must be some plan I am presuming to deal with the registered ones who are non-compliant, or we are just accepting that as, well that is how it is?

Ms. Bhagwandin: Okay, Chair, so we are addressing it. We continue to liaise with those persons to get them up to quality standards at this point in time. Again, once the Act—we have that policy document as well as we have the revision of the Education Act, once the Education Act comes in—is revised to include the ECC, of course, definitely the Ministry of Education would have also greater autonomy in addressing the shortfalls of the unregistered as well as registered private institutions. But we continue to work along with them to educate them to get them registered or to meet the standards.

Mr. Chairman: This is an insensitive comparison but I will use it nonetheless. The reason for the preponderance of registered non-compliant or unregistered is because of a shortfall in capacity in the State side, are there plans to expand the State provision of services of ECC Centres throughout the country? I did not bother with the analogy, I will get roasted for it.

Dr. Smith: So, Chair, normally in terms of the expansion we would look at the information that comes out of the census or the survey of living conditions as well as the establishment of communities, well through HDC or LSA, and based on those reports we do identify sites and areas for expansion in terms of ECCE.

Mr. Chairman: Would you have a sense of how many those are moving to the next two/three years?

Dr. Smith: I cannot say at this point in time, Chair, but we can submit a written response.

Mr. Chairman: Is there a standardization of school fees for the private registered centres?

Mr. Smith: No, there is not.

Mr. Chairman: So they can charge whatever they want?

Ms. Collis: Yes.

Mr. Chairman: Is there a guide—is it part of your guideline at least, face structure?

Dr. Smith: No, it is not.

Mr. Chairman: Do your guidelines include nutrition requirements, sanitation requirements?

Ms. Collis: Yes.

Dr. Smith: Yes, they do. Yes, they do.

Mr. Chairman: And how do you monitor that, with your visits?

Ms. Collis: Yes.

Mr. Chairman: Okay, are we.

Ms. Collis: Yes, we do monitor the process.

Mr. Chairman: Just about five minutes before so we are going to hope to close up at 12, and we want to thank you all for your participation. I am going to invite the leads of each of the three stakeholders before us to provide closing comments, and you can again submit any additional information that you promised or you think is relevant to the enquiry to the Secretariat, and we greatly appreciate that. I will start with Dr. Smith at the education Ministry, please.

Dr. Smith: Okay. So, thank you very much, and we want to thank the Committee for providing us with the opportunity to share with the general public what is taking place within the ECCE sector, and we do look forward to the amended Act as well as the registration of private schools in Trinidad and Tobago. And we wanted to encourage parents even as they make that decision to send their children to an ECCE Centre please contact the Ministry of Education to ensure that you are sending your child to a registered centre. Thank you very much, Chair.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. Mrs. Lewis.

Mrs. Lewis: Thank you, Chair. On behalf of the board and staff and the Children's Authority, we want to thank you for allowing us to be part of this discussion which

for me it was very fruitful and insightful. The Children's Authority is very concerned, always very concerned when we have any abuse of children, and we recognize that our ECC Centres is one of those places where children can be abused, and so we will continue to work very closely with the Ministry of Education and other stakeholders to ensure the safety of our children in Trinidad and Tobago. So, thank you again, and thank you everyone.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much, and Ms. Second at the Assembly.

Ms. Second: We want to say thank you on behalf of our Chief Secretary and our Secretary for Education, and the team at DERTech. Thank you for inviting us to be part of this engagement. We look forward to continue working and collaboration with all of the members here, and we are looking forward to most of all those solid amendment in our Education Act that actually give us teeth so we can go in, whatever we do not monitor does not get done. So we are grateful for the opportunity, and we say thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you so much. Thank all of you for being here with us today. We would like to thank all stakeholders who participated in today's deliberations, and the Committee members for their continued support and participation, and the staff of the Office of the Parliament and our Secretariat for your procedural and logistical support, and to the viewing and listening audience, thank you all for your comments/questions and for viewing. On behalf of the Committee, I am Paul Richards, the Chairman, thank you for viewing, and do have a safe afternoon.

11.59 a.m.: *Meeting adjourned.*

Appendix IV – Verbatim Notes of 17th Meeting

VERBATIM NOTES OF THE SEVENTEENTH VIRTUAL MEETING OF THE JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION HELD (IN PUBLIC) ON WEDNESDAY, JUNE 28, 2023, AT 10.15 A.M.

PRESENT

| | |
|--------------------|---------------------|
| Dr. Paul Richards | Chairman |
| Mr. Avinash Singh | Member |
| Ms. Vandana Mohit | Member |
| Mr. Roger Monroe | Member |
| Mr. David Nakhid | Member |
| Mr. Julien Ogilvie | Secretary |
| Mr. Brian Lucio | Assistant Secretary |

ABSENT

| | |
|-----------------------|----------------------------------|
| Ms. Pennelope Beckles | Member [<i>Excused</i>] |
| Mr. Esmond Forde | Vice-Chairman [<i>Excused</i>] |
| Mr. Rohan Sinanan | Member |

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

| | |
|-----------------------------|---|
| Ms. Simone Williams | Deputy Permanent Secretary |
| Ms. Carol Bhagwandin | Director, ECCE |
| Ms. Ayinka Nurse-Carrington | Manager, Student Support Service Division |

UNREVISED

| | |
|--------------------------|--|
| Ms. Michelle Collins | Research Officer, ECCE |
| Ms. Jasmin Lewis Johnson | ECCE Administrator/Teacher (Port of Spain and Environs) |
| Ms. Denise Murren Moham | ECCE Administrator/Teacher (Caroni) |
| Ms. Sharon Sookhan | ECCE Administrator/Teacher (South Eastern) |

**TOBAGO HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY - DIVISION OF EDUCATION, RE-
SEARCH AND TECHNOLOGY (THA-DERTech)**

| | |
|-----------------------------|---|
| Mrs. Ann Natasha Second | Technical Advisor |
| Mrs. Loraine George-Edoo | ECCE Manager |
| Mrs. Nadine Philips-Alleyne | Administrator/Teacher Signal Hill ECCE |
| Mrs. Lindell Rochford | Administration/Teacher Mt. St. George ECCE |

MINISTRY OF HEALTH

| | |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Dr. Osafo Fraser | County Medical Officer of Health |
| Dr. Mark Dookeran | Chief Public Health Inspector Ag. |

**NATIONAL MAINTENANCE TRAINING AND SECURITY COMPANY
LIMITED (MTS)**

| | |
|--------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Mr. Lennox Rattansingh | Chief Executive Officer |
| Mr. Desmond Daly | Divisional Manager, Security |
| Mr. Christopher Lackrajh | Construction Operations Manager |
| Mr. Sherwin Gosine | Divisional Manager, Marketing |

UNREVISED

Mr. Chairman: Welcome to the viewing and listening audience to the Seventeenth Meeting of the Joint Select Committee on Social Services and Public Administration. This is the Committee's second hearing with stakeholders pursuant to our enquiry, on an examination of the regulations and administration of public and private Early Childhood Care and Education institutions in Trinidad and Tobago.

Members of the public are invited to submit their comments or questions via the Parliament's social media platforms, YouTube Channel *ParlView*, or via Facebook or Twitter. The stakeholders before us today include the following. Members of the team from the Ministry of Education, at the Ministry of Health, the Tobago House of Assembly - Division of Education, Research and Technology, and the National Maintenance Training and Security Company Limited, MTS. At this time we are going to invite members of our Committee. The Committee, of course, are the Social Service and Public Administration Joint Select Committee to introduce themselves. We can start with member Singh.

[Introductions made]

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. We are expecting member Rohan Sinanan to join us in process and we have excuses from member Esmond Forde who is out the jurisdiction, and member Penelope Beckles, who is Minister Beckles, who is otherwise engaged. We thank you for joining us this morning. We have three objectives in this enquiry:

1. To access the regulatory framework that governs Early Childhood Care and Education institutions in Trinidad and Tobago;
2. To access the performance of ECCE centres for the period 2017 to

2022, inclusive of systems implemented to combat learning loss experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic;

3. To access the health and safety compliance of ECCE centres; and
4. To access the ECCE curriculum in relation to preparation for our children into primary school.

At this time we would like to invite the team leads from the teams before us to introduce themselves and their teams. We will start with Ms. Simone Williams and we are asking you to deliver a brief two-minute opening statement on behalf of your team and your entity. Starting with Ms. Simone Williams, Deputy Permanent Secretary in the Education Ministry.

[Introductions made]

Ms. Williams: Good morning to Chair and members of the Committee on Social Services and Public Administration. The Ministry of Education thanks you for the invitation to attend this second public hearing themed, “An examination of the regulation and administration of public and private early childhood institutions in Trinidad and Tobago”. The regulation and administration of Early Childhood Care and Education centres, commonly referred to as ECCE centres, forms a critical part of the achievement of the Ministry’s mandate to create a modern, relevant, education and training system.

The Ministry recognizes the challenges identified through previous discourse on the topic of the administration of public and private early childhood institutions in Trinidad and Tobago including inadequate legislation to regulate private centres, lack of compliance among unregulated centres, and the reluctance of some institutions to become registered. In this regard, the Ministry is pleased to announce that the Cabinet has recently approved the policy for the registration of private schools in Trinidad and Tobago. This comprehensive policy will govern the operations of

private schools and provide mechanisms to ensure compliance in respect of the approved curriculum, teacher requirements, health and safety standards, reporting requirements, and evaluation of student performance.

Consequently, the Ministry of Education will be strengthening its capacity to monitor the ECCE subsector which will ensure adherence to the provision of quality services. It should also be noted that the Ministry recently received its first draft of the amendments of the Education Act which is currently being reviewed and is expected to provide greater governance of the ECCE subsector. The Ministry of Education takes this opportunity to thank the Committee for its examination of the state of the regulation and administration of public and private early childhood institutions in Trinidad and Tobago and looks forward to your questions and feedback. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you so much, Ms. Williams and your team. Let us move now to the acting Chief Public Health Inspector in the Ministry of Health, Dr. Mark Dookeran. Dr. Dookeran.

[Introduction made]

Dr. Dookeran: Mr. Chairman, the Ministry of Health is pleased to be a part of this discussion on the examination of the regulation and administration of public and private early childhood institutions in Trinidad and Tobago, having the responsibility for the prevention and control of communicable diseases and the health and safety of the population. The Ministry of Health is committed to working with all stakeholders to ensure that a safe, healthy and environment is provided for pupils and staff in all schools nationwide. Moreover, ECCE pupils form a small part of the wider community of school children, however focus on this younger age group is emphasized. The Ministry of Health is looking forward to this engagement and improving the school environment and ultimately the lives of children in Trinidad and Tobago. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you, Drs. Dookeran and Fraser. We move now to the Technology Adviser of the Tobago House of Assembly - Division of Education, Research and Technology, and Ms. Ann Second. Good morning, Ms. Second.

[Introductions made]

Ms. Second: Thank you kindly.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you so much and we move now to the National Maintenance Training and Security Company Limited, MTS, and Mr. Lennox Rattansingh.

[Introductions made]

Mr. Rattansingh: MTS, Mr. Chairman, was formed in 1979 basically to deal with the Ministry of Education and schools. We have extended our services to other public buildings in the country, and while we are in almost 100 secondary schools and over 500 primary schools, of the 141 ECCE government-owned we are only doing security for 34 and we are doing janitorial and maintenance for one. We are doing no services for SERVOL, or the privately run ECCEs, or in Tobago. We look forward to this session and we are always willing and ready to assist these sessions in going forward in building our country. Thank you very much.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you so much. Before we move forward, I would like to take time on behalf of the members of the Committee and the Committee's secretariat to extend our deepest condolences to the family and friends of Ms. Zobida Ali-Mannan and Ms. Sharon Sookai, both of whom were part of the Education Ministry's team. You suffered these two tragic losses recently and our condolences, sympathies and prayers are with you, their families and, of course, all your colleagues. We thank you for being here. We now it is a tremendous lost for your team.

Moving forward we remind both Committee members and officials to direct their questions and concerns through the Chair. We remind members and officials to kindly activate the microphone on your devices when you are acknowledged by Chair, and turn off the microphone when you finish your contribution or question.

The hearing will proceed as agreed to by the Committee. So we can start now. If we can start with the Education Ministry. You just indicated that you have had approval from the Cabinet on the policy for private schools including curriculum, teacher recruitment, and health and safety issues, and I think one other which escapes in memory now. Could you give us a little more information on that please so we get some context? Because I know members of the Committee would have visited many of the—some of the private institutions and the Government and government-assisted ones, and while the curricula was adopted by all there were some variances in infrastructure, guidelines, compliance, some health and safety issues, and some issues related to teacher training requirements. So could you give us a little update or a little more information on that policy for private schools please, private ECCE centres?

Ms. Williams: Good morning Chair again. The policy on the registration of private schools in Trinidad and Tobago was approved by Cabinet in early June of this year, and the policy speaks to—it is a comprehensive policy which basically governs the operation of private schools. So I can carry you through some of the details. So this policy outlines the registration procedure for all schools which are unregistered. So it speaks to the requirements for registration, the requirements and the needs to obtain statutory approvals prior to becoming registered with the Ministry of Education. So some of these approvals would be from our statutory bodies such as WASA, the electrical inspectorate, fire service, health authorities, Ministry of Planning and Development, and regional corporations. There are other necessary documents which are related to the supply such as details on the location, details on the curriculum, details on timetables, details on the layout of the school, details on how student performance will be evaluated, because these are necessary for the Ministry to provide regulation and for monitoring and evaluation of these schools.

Calls are to be completed when submitted to the Ministry. Site visits will be

conducted. This is another key aspect the policy, of the implementation of the policy would be the strengthening of the Monitoring and Evaluation Unit of the ECCE division because they will then go out to the ECCE centres and monitor the performance of the schools, monitor, ensure, that they are meeting the requirements of the Ministry, the requirements to be registered. Because upon—if a certificate of registration has been issued to a school and they are found to be deficient and are not compliant, they can be deregistered. A moratorium of three years is to be granted to unregistered schools to ensure that they become compliant. Teachers at these schools are also part of the three-year moratorium in order to obtain the necessary qualifications to ensure that they are compliant with all of the requirements of the Ministry to ensure that their registration stands. A copy can be provided. The policy has been improved and a copy can be provided for the Committee's ease of reference.

Mr. Chairman: We would greatly appreciate it. Thank you so much. I am really happy to hear that and I know the other members of the Committee are happy to hear that also. Because upon our visits many of the issues that you have highlighted including the approvals, statutory approvals, the monitoring and compliance, the expansion of the monitoring team, the health and safety issue, the teacher training, the issue of registered and unregistered private schools were many of the concerns in terms of regulation of the sector—the private schools in particular and some of the government-assisted private schools that would have come to our attention.

While we were quite happy with what we saw of the government administered schools—because clearly they had more resources, they had more space, the infrastructure was up to mark, the State could more easily monitor—some of the issues that we saw with the private schools—and this session is not to bash the private ECCE centres because what I noticed and what the Committee noticed is that many

of these private ECCE centres provide a significant and critical service in the community, and they are embedded in these communities and they come from the communities and offer a service. So it has networked into a community ecosystem, and while they may not have the resources of the state assisted or the state administered schools, they are no less important in the matrix of early childhood care centres in Trinidad and Tobago.

So the regulation of them—and if I am not mistaken they were all registered that we visited, but they sometimes did not have the resources to become compliant. You mentioned a three-year moratorium for unregistered, but some of the registered ones also have issues with infrastructure and compliance. And the resources to become complaint and the concern is that while there is a three-year moratorium which is admirable, what happens if these institutions are not able or do not have the capacity to become compliant because of the role they play in those societies? Is it that the Ministry is going to supply technical expertise and other resources to help them become compliant? Or is it just become compliant or we will shut you down?

Ms. Bhagwandin: Good morning again, Chair, Carol Bhagwandin will take the question. So Ministry of Education definitely, we are not in the business of just shutting down and disregarding the service being provided by these providers. But we are going to continue to provide the technical support, hence the reason we are going to go back out and continue our stakeholder engagement because we spent an entire year working with stakeholders on the drafting of the policy which is now approved. So definitely what we did back in October of last year, we did an exercise where private providers had to supply us with information asking what type of assistance you may need in order to becoming compliant once this policy document is enforced and implemented. So we have that information on hand and we go out and begin providing the necessary technical support needed for these private providers to come up to the standards.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. Let me tell you what the concern is. The concern is that, yes, this is a good move. Nobody could argue with this. We visited eight early childhood care centres, two Government—if I am not mistaken, Brian—and six either private or government-assisted private, and most of them have not been visited by Ministry officials for years. In some instances over 10 years. And if that is a small sample of what is happening out there, the concern is that how are you going to know what is happening with those unregistered private centres that may be in areas that may not have come to your attention? And even those that we visited were all registered and had not been visited by Ministry officials to check compliance, health and safety, adherence to curriculum, teacher training, et cetera. Because that was one of the major concerns that was cited by members of Committee when we met afterwards after visiting these centres. And the impact on those private centres of the pandemic was devastating in terms of their ability to provide the service and provide the standard of care of service to the children because they are embedded in their community, and their parents preferred to send their children to these centres because of their connection with the communities. So that is the concern moving forward.

Ms. Bagwandin: Chair, that is why we look at the strengthening of the monitoring of those centres, and we talk about the strengthening by the human resources necessary to go out and actually visit all centres throughout the country. We would have the family communities, support officers, the health and safety officers, curriculum facilitators, they would be all going out to render that support needed and that is what we spoke about in strengthening of our capacity to actually go out there and meet that need.

Mr. Chairman: Is there a particular framework or policy for those private centres that would have been created at people's homes? Because is what we saw in some instances. That is part of the evolution of the early childhood care in Trinidad and

Tobago where a former teacher, a retired teacher, or a teacher leaves the State's teaching service and opens an early childhood care centre under their home, they modify rooms, and there is not a lot you can do in those situations. And in some of those situations they are providing services for 30/40 children on an ongoing basis and, as I said, embedded in their community, and that is who the parents trust. So what is the plan to deal with those? Because there is not a lot of infrastructural upgrades that they may have the capacity to engage in and become compliant and acquire statutory approvals for that kind of service being operated in a household environment. Is there a plan to mitigate that kind of circumstance? Because that is exactly what you are going to encounter in many circumstances.

Ms. Bhagwandin: Okay. So when we look at—yes, we have a fair idea of what is really happening out there. A number of these centres definitely in people's homes as you would have observed in our visits. So again, we are going to provide the support as best as possible in partnership with the Ministry of Health and all other agencies to get them compliant in keeping with the policies.

Mr. Chairman: Well I do not know how you can have a fair idea if out of the six private schools we visited five had not been visited by the Education Ministry for years. And if that is just a sample, an unscientific sample of what is happening out there, how are you in a position to even know what the lay of land is generally—

Ms. Williams: Chair—

Mr. Chairman:—with regard to private institutions?

Ms. Williams:—I would like to suggest— I know that there have been some challenges in terms of the staffing of the—because there is an existing Monitoring Evaluation Unit within the ECCE Division, however it has not been fully staffed. A number of positions are vacant. A number of positions have not been filled. However—

Mr. Chairman: How many positions are vacant? Would you have that information?

Ms. Williams: We can provide it in writing for you. We can provide you the structure and the vacant positions, number of vacant positions.

Mr. Chairman: One of the bits of information, the data points that we also gathered is that the Ministry officials did not even know that registered private institutions had changed locations.

Ms. Williams: And that is one of the requirements. Within the policy there are guidelines for—it is necessary for the private institutions to notify the Ministry of any mandatory changes. Let me just find that for you and I can highlight it for you.

Mr. Chairman: This sounds like a herculean task, I will tell you flat. I do not know if the secretariat can get for me, there was a huge number of Early Childhood Care Centres in Trinidad and Tobago identified in our first enquiry. Do you have that information about the number of government versus government-assisted Early Childhood Care Centres? I think the Ministry provided that. Do you have it on hand?

Ms. Bhagwandin: Yes. So it is 143 government-assisted centres, 57 SERVOL centres, 12 centres in Tobago, and approximately 631 private centres.

Mr. Chairman: That you know about.

Ms. Bhagwandin: That we know about, correct.

Mr. Chairman: Six hundred-plus private centres that you know about. That sounds like quite the task to me, but the Ministry says they are providing the resources for that so we will wait and see. I have great concerns about this because of what I saw on the ground.

Ms. Williams: Chair, a suggestion can be that the Ministry can conduct an audit within communities to try to identify as many as possible of the private ECCE centres perhaps. I know as you mentioned it would be a herculean task. We can liaise

with other Government Ministries to conduct this perhaps, other Government agencies, as part of the regulation of the sector.

Mr. Chairman: I find it curious that the Ministry is now thinking of performing this audit, but I will move on. Can you comment on statements made by teachers and administrators concerning the need for teacher to reapply or continuously seek reemployment for the same positions they currently hold in some of these centres?

Ms. Williams: The ECCE positions are contract positions. So they are guided by the guidelines for contract employment within the public service, normally a three-year contract, and the positions are normally advertised and persons will reapply.

Mr. Chairman: How disruptive is that? Because many of the teachers we spoke to, on condition of anonymity, indicated that they had the same qualifications they had before the contract ended, the position is the same, but they were being asked to jump through hoops to reapply for continuant service under a new contract and it was frustrating to them. And they had to re-interview for positions they had before that they were deemed qualified for in a previous contract.

Ms. Williams: So these positions unlike the rest of teaching service are contract positions, and as mentioned previously we have to be guided by the guidelines provided by the Chief Personnel Officer in terms of contract employment which normally speaks to advertising of positions and reapplication of persons.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. I will defer to member Mohit. Go ahead please.

Ms. Mohit: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. To the Ministry of Education, Mr. Chairman, we just got a response in terms of 143 government-assisted ECCE as well 631 private centres.

10.45 a.m.

And one of the issues that we would have met on these visits would have been that there were challenges as it relates to capacity, meaning how many persons can be housed at government-assisted ECCE centres. So it is clearly gleaned that you know

the private centres are indeed needed.

But in terms of training and development for teachers, I want to ask the Ministry of Education how often are professional development training programmes offered to teachers and administrators of these ECCE centres and whether the Ministry can confirm if these training and development programmes offered by the Ministry are open to the public or are they specifically for teachers employed through the Ministry of Education?

Mrs. Bhagwandin: Member Mohit, Carol Bhagwandin responding here to you now. So we have on-going training at the Ministry of Education and we are very proud to say it is not restricted to members of staff at government-assisted centres but we open these trainings to all providers. So we even have a teacher development unit and we have continuous professional development sessions, either curriculum delivery or how you are enhancing your skills and qualifications in order to meet the changes and ensuring developmentally appropriate curriculum delivery of children. So that is ongoing and that of course, we also have our training agencies for tertiary education institutions where persons could also go. But definitely, continuous professional development with both public and the private ECCE sector. The invites are always sent out to persons.

Ms. Mohit: So, Mr. Chairman, another question. Mrs. Bhagwandin, I am hearing you are saying that invites are sent out to both private and public in terms of your training, but when we did these visits, one of the common findings was that persons, especially at the private ECCE centres, are unaware of the offerings by the Ministry of Education in terms of professional development training programmes. Can I just ask you if your invitations are not working and I do not know how many of them you are sending it to, whether it is all 631, how do you, as the Ministry of Education, plan to increase the number of persons accessing these programmes, especially among those at the private ECCE centres? Accessing these programmes in terms of

accessibility for persons from these private institutions.

Mrs. Bhagwandin: So we have in existence our database providing us with the email addresses for all private providers. Some of course we get feedback from others, some may say “acknowledged”, some may not respond at all. Where persons invite us to come in and do training, definitely we go in and provide the training to them. There is also on the Ministry of Education’s website where the Teacher Development Unit where training sessions are provided and persons could join. We would be able to provide information with the support of the Teacher Development Unit as per the number of training sessions and the topic persons would have received training on at a later time.

Ms. Mohit: Okay. Very quickly. I know you mentioned—PS mentioned in terms of the Cabinet approval and the new policy which came about sometime early June. In terms of these development training programmes, you were mentioning that via email, you would send invitations, some would acknowledge, some would not, does this policy include anything as it relates to compliance with training and development for persons within, let us say the private institutions?

Ms. Collins: Good morning, member. Michelle Collins, I will respond to your question. In terms of the approved registration policy, we do have in there that all teachers must be trained in terms of having their certificate from an accredited tertiary institution, that is one of the requirements in order to be reregistered or registered with the Ministry of Education, and this is really to ensure that teachers out there would be delivering quality services for the children in their care.

Ms. Mohit: Okay, well we definitely look forward to that. Just one more thing that I would like to get some details on. Of course, everything is measurable success, how does it work for these institutions? And what I would like from you, based on what you are saying to us, and based on what we have seen at these particular visits which we would have engaged in, is whether you have with you any information or

do you have a general idea of the reach of your professional development programmes and can you provide for us a percentage, let us say, of teachers who access these programmes, both private and public. And in addition to that, in terms of training and development, what do you have in place, whether your policy would involve anything as it relates to students who would require that type of special training or in terms of your liaison with the Ministry of Health. Because one of the challenges we saw these institutions facing was that of persons with special needs and access to the institutions, as well as, you know, referrals and how do they work in collaboration with the Ministry of Health, et cetera. So do you have any type of measurable success in terms of who really accessed these types of training and development programmes?

Mrs. Bhagwandin: The training and development session, we would be able to provide that in writing for you, we just do not want to call a figure here as well as the topic that we would have discussed. I would ask our SSSD Manager to expand more on the special educational needs of children.

Mrs. Nurse-Carrington: Good morning, Chair, good morning, member Mohit. In terms of our children with special needs, the Student Support Services Division continues to provide support for both the public and private ECCE centres. The support is provided at the private centres in a technical manner. In terms of what are some of the technical services that we can provide in terms of—for these centres can be consultative services. We also provide advisement to parents and teachers. And due to the uniqueness of each case of the children, we provide a case-by-case consultation with recommendations for further interventions for both the parents and the teachers. Interventions that can be used both at home and in school in terms of looking at how they address different developmental needs of the children at the time. Teachers are supported through different intervention strategies and that will continue as the process goes on.

Ms. Mohit: Mr. Chairman, just one more question based on what we are being told. Can I just ask simply if you have any facts and figures to support your statement? Because of the fact that what we would have experienced on these site visits, it would have been lengthy, tedious processes for these persons, lack of support, lack of information, et cetera, for persons who require that type of support, teachers within these centres, parents who have children within these centres. If you do not have it, if you are willing to provide that to us in writing, but I would really like to hear some facts and figures in terms of this type of support provided. How ready teachers are within these institutions to deal with these matters and what have they been provided with to deal with students who they are faced with in terms of special needs?

Mrs. Nurse-Carrington: As of the 27th of June 2023, through our special education needs assessment for the ECCE centres, we have 93 suspected cases of students presenting with different abilities and disabilities and 31 students who are diagnosed currently. Also referring to that date, we have 10 of our students receiving intervention, various types of interventions, either from the special education services, five, and five from speech and language therapy. The other interventions may or may not include social work services through home visits, guidance and—not guidance and counselling services but more occupational therapy and behaviour therapy. And students who are receiving the interventions are students who have been referred to the Ministry of Education through the Student Support Services Division.

Mr. Chairman: Can I just intervene and ask something here if I could? You mentioned the intervention strategies of the Student Support Services, the information that we have been told over and over is how strapped Student Support Services is in terms of even the primary and secondary school students in Trinidad and Tobago and the increased load Student Support Services has encountered after the COVID-19 pandemic. You have identified 143 government centres, 600-plus private centres, 57 Servol et al and you are telling us that intervention services have

been provided for 93 diagnosed, 31, 10 and five which is just over about 130, 140, and you provide technical support to students and parents.

One of the things we encountered at a school in—is it central or south?—is that a parent was extremely frustrated to the point of tears and a teacher frustrated to the point of tears because their child clearly had some sort of undiagnosed special need and what the parent was going through was the Ministry telling the parent take the child to the doctor at the health centre for intervention and the doctor telling the parent, take the child back to the Education Ministry for intervention and back and forth and back and forth and the parent became so frustrated with that run around while their child was languishing and not getting any intervention and not being actively engaged in the school. What are we to tell a parent like that when you tell us that there is intervention?

And the numbers that you have identified in terms of intervention are not in alignment with what the global statistics indicate is the prevalence of children with disabilities and special needs at between 10 and 15 per cent of the school population. So if we are to take that as a global benchmark, we are merely scratching the surface and you could imagine dealing with a typically-presenting child is hard enough at that age group, imagine a parent trying to provide for their child in a situation where the teachers are not trained and technical support is sporadic. Because training a teacher in special needs intervention is an extensive process. Getting a parent acclimatized to what they are dealing with and also providing intervention that supports what is happening in the centre is another intensive process. So what you have indicated to me does not seem adequate in any way form or fashion in dealing with the magnitude of the issue here.

Mrs. Nurse-Carrington: The issue is a large one that we are coping with and there is always need to increase the number of staffing we have to meet the need of our students in Trinidad and Tobago, especially our special needs students. But there is

a process and the government ECCE centres normally follow that process and it is a nine-step process and I am going to refer to the Joint Select Committee on Social Services and Public Administration, March 1st, 2023, page 10 and the referral process is there outlined as the nine steps identified by the Ministry of Education, education pathway for students with special needs where the teacher monitors and engages the parent. That is discussed with the parents and the professionals of the expert process and if there is no improvement, then the approval form with supporting documentation then moves to the Student Support Services Division of the MOE.

This case is then assigned to either the school social worker, special education officer, or guidance officer, as need of the recommendation and then recommendations are implemented and the student is monitored over a period of time. If required, the student is then referred to what we call our Developmental Assessment Intervention Unit of SSSD which houses our cadre of psychologists for further evaluation or referral, or to an external agency or a service provider.

Students who have been diagnosed then receive an individualized education plan which is a developed recommendation of interventions that are then implemented by teachers and also guardians and parents and students who need those targeted interventions and the progress monitored by the parents, teachers and SSSD person. So that is the process for parents who have observed that the children are not reaching the different developmental stages, they can reach out and review that process with the children.

Mr. Chairman: What you have identified there is a commendable extraction from any special education protocol around the world as best practice. The question is do you have the resources to do that effectively given the load that is presenting in Trinidad and Tobago? That is the question, not that you know what to do, but is it being done? Because an intervention for a child with special needs, depending on the diagnosis, needs constant attention and remediation from somebody who is

trained. Not the diagnosis, the individual education—the IEP has to be administered on a daily basis by someone who is trained.

And I will give you an example of a government centre we visited given your identification of the nine-point plan. The supervisor at that centre—is it in central Trinidad?—followed the nine-point plan and over a year is awaiting any sign of a trained special needs teacher or any intervention for a six-year-old boy who has a profound developmental issue who is not receiving any intervention and is in the institution, a government institution, almost as a babysitting there. They do the best they can with them. In some instances, they have learnt on their own to feed him because he has some issues with swallowing and they struggle to just keep him occupied in the day because they have not been able to get any intervention although they followed the nine-point plan. So what do you tell the parent of that child?

Mrs. Nurse-Carrington: Chair, at this time, the parent—

Mr. Chairman: A teacher or supervisor who has to deal with that every day.

Mrs. Nurse-Carrington: Again, in that situation, the parent, the teacher is—feel free to reach out to the officers of the SSSD service where we would provide that on-going support and consultation and intervention—

Mr. Chairman: I think you misunderstood me. The supervisor and the teacher have reached out on numerous occasions to Student Support Services for over a year.

Mrs. Nurse-Carrington: And also added to that, we also provide student aids. So at the moment, at the ECCE level, two students have been provided with the student aides upon their diagnosis and request. So parents would be advised by the Student Support Services to have the aid or apply for the aid and we try to facilitate the aid to address the different needs of those students.

Mr. Chairman: If I tell you that does not happen in that case, what is the next point of recourse? Because the supervisor who shall remain nameless and the teacher expressed deep and profound frustration because of their care for this child.

Mrs. Nurse-Carrington: The Ministry of Education has been in consultation with the OJT department to provide aid for students. We have been working very hard to address that need of aids for different levels of students in our education system.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. Member Singh had to step out for a while. Member Mohit, do you have any more questions?

Ms. Mohit: Mr. Chairman, before we move on from this particular point, I just have one more comment, maybe a question it may include. Mr. Chairman, if I may say, Ministry of Education, that you have outlined your nine-point plan, you have outlined what you have said before in a JSC, you have outlined what you are supposed to do and if I am to say based on our visits, this process is not working, I am to ask you what is next, how are we going to make this better for these types of students, for these teachers who are trying, attempting to the best of their ability to make this work to give these students a life? If I am to ask you what is next for you and what are you going to do, what would you say to us and the general public today?

Mrs. Nurse-Carrington: At this time, Chair, the Ministry is reviewing their implementation plan for the private school policy and we are working with our different units to provide the necessary support. I want to reiterate that our Student Support Services Division continues to provide technical support for all parents and teachers through the consultation services and case-by-case services and will encourage parents to reach out to treat with these on a needs basis.

Mr. Chairman: Member Nakhid, are you ready?

Mr. Nakhid: Yes, Chairman.

Mr. Chairman: Go ahead please.

Mr. Nakhid: Good morning, Ministry of Education. Based on the previous discourse between the Chairman and member Mohit, it only serves to say that it has revealed yawning gaps in the process and the delivery of the Ministry of Education because we were there. We visited these places so we speak with some experience,

all of us. But let us try and find what can be a possible solution. So then the question must be asked with some specific intentions. How many special needs certified teachers are now employed by the Ministry of Education? That must be an answer you have on hand.

Mrs. Nurse-Carrington: Chair, we could provide that detailed information in writing.

Mr. Nakhid: Okay, you do not have that information but you are aware of how many special needs students? You stated that before, you gave a figure.

Mrs. Nurse-Carrington: Yes, we have the number of diagnosed students which is 31 at the ECCE level.

Mr. Nakhid: Right and well then we have to wait for your answer in writing. I would think for such a hearing that we have now that will be information you have readily at hand for the public. How many certified special needs teachers are employed by the Ministry of Education? Because from there, we can have an assessment of what is the ratio of teachers because you stated that you provide technical services, then what was your—how do we know how efficient is that technical service that you provide, how efficient would that be when we do not have an idea how many special needs teachers are certified in proportion to how many special needs students that we had to provide service, because obviously something is going wrong, as member Mohit and Chairman Richards said, there are gaps that need to be filled.

So let me make it easier for you. Other than providing in writing and all the nine-point plans and everything that we provide, I understand, I do not mean to place any of you all in any discomfort. Do you all feel that you all are getting enough resources from central Government to fulfil what we know needs to be filled, those gaps that need to be filled? And you have to be honest here, it is about the children. Do you all feel that you all are well resourced sufficiently?

Ms. Williams: Sen. Nakhid. Sen. Nakhid.

Mr. Nakhid: Yes, Ma'am.

Ms. Williams: The Ministry as part of its human resource plan is trying to build the capacity of the student support division. I believe a note has been prepared for Cabinet and it has gone to PMCD so that hopefully at some point soon, we will have additional resources, additional contract positions for employment of persons to fill these needs so that they can go out and meet the needs and the demands of the ECCE sector and the education sector on the whole because it will not be specifically for ECCE students.

Mr. Nakhid: Well your answer begs the question, if you said that you are preparing a note and more contract—

Ms. Williams: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Nakhid: How many then—

Ms. Williams: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Nakhid: Sorry. Let me ask the question, how many—

Ms. Williams: I do not have the figure.

Mr. Nakhid: You do not have the figure?

Ms. Williams: [*Inaudible*] provide it in writing for you.

Mr. Nakhid: You will provide that in writing, okay.

Ms. Williams: I do not have it on—

Mr. Nakhid: Okay. So we have identified— I will move on because there is no way I can go forward with further questions on that matter because you are not aware of exactly how many staff is needed, how many certified special—

Mr. Chairman: If I could intervene member Nakhid. I mean I find it difficult to accept that the Ministry has come before the JSC to answer questions on Early Childhood Care Centres when one of the main issues is students with disabilities and special needs without the information.

Mr. Nakhid: The basic of information. This basic of information.

Mr. Chairman: Without information regarding the number of positions to be filled, the number of positions that are filled, the number of trained special needs teachers that are available, the number of positions for special needs teachers that need to be filled. That is astounding to me quite frankly that that needs to be provided in writing. So the Director of special needs services—Manager, sorry, of Student Support Services Division, Mrs. Nurse-Carrington is not aware of the number of special needs teachers who are currently employed and how many are projected to be needed for the system?

Mrs. Nurse-Carrington: Chair, I will provide that information in writing so that you will have the exact figure.

Mr. Chairman: Do you have a ballpark figure?

Mrs. Nurse-Carrington: I do not want to guess at this time, I do have a figure but I want it to be the exact figure and we will provide it in writing.

Mr. Chairman: Member Nakhid, go ahead please.

Mr. Nakhid: Yeah, okay. So we are aware of well the failures that obviously is a deficiency in the structure. But do not get frustrated, Chairman, it is how it is.

My question then is: Have any screenings or have there been any increased screenings on psycho-educational assessments for students at this level? You know, you have any idea of the waiting times, how lengthy it could be?—because we heard those concerns when we visited. So have there been any assessments made in doing the screenings of these special needs kids? Can you give me an answer to that? Ministry of Education.

Ms. Collins: Sorry Sen. Nakhid, Michelle Collins we will take the question.

Mr. Nakhid: Okay.

Ms. Collins: What has happened or what continues to happen is in terms of the process, there is a special needs assessment that is sent out to all centres that all

teachers are to respond to and this assessment gives us a sense of how many students are suspected in terms of a disability or a need and those that have been diagnosed.

11:15 a.m.

From the Ministry's side we have officers—specialized officers that will then go out—student support services officers that will go out and verify this information that has been submitted by our teachers, in terms of the children that are suspected. And, of course, we know those that are diagnosed when we go through the paperwork and so on, and then from that process support is then provided to the teachers. And then, of course, the children, the screening process continues. So we know that it sounds like a lengthy process, but of course this helps us to be able to identify the children, ensure to the children that are identified that they are, in truth, that they do need the support. And then, of course, the necessary assistance to be sent to the centres in terms of teachers, they are trained to be able to support the children at the centre and as well as support the parents—well they know how to support their children at home as well. So it is a very holistic approach that is taken, in terms of what is provided to children with special needs. Did that answer your question Senator?

Mr. Chairman: I do not know if he got bumped off, maybe he did. But I think it answered the question. Member Monroe, can you go ahead please? Because member Singh had to step out for a while, while member Nakhid may be able to re-join us. Member Monroe are you there? Go ahead please.

Mr. Monroe: Yes, Chairman. Thank you very much—

Mr. Chairman: And if you can take on question seven also in the absence of member Singh, please member Monroe?

Mr. Monroe: Should I proceed with seven and the other question as well?

Mr. Chairman: Yes, yes thank you.

Mr. Monroe: Okay, thank you very much, Chairman. To the Ministry of Education, could you please tell me if there is any plans for the standardization in the delivery of the curriculum at both private and public ECCE centres to ensure the alignment of the preparedness of these students into the primary school infant level? That is my first question.

Mrs. Bhagwandin: Good morning member Monroe. So definitely we have a curriculum, we have a research-based curriculum that—it is a national document that is used, and it is also on our website and there out in the public. So, that document continues to be used at our public centres and of course, with the approved policy we now have for private schools that we are going to encourage the private providers to use that document. And yes it definitely prepares the child for entry into the primary school, because as I mentioned, it is a research-based document. It is focusing on the holistic development of the child using what we called the five strands. So when we talk about the five strands, we are talking about effective communication, intellectual empowerment, wellness, citizenship and belonging and aesthetic expression. So again it is tailored towards the whole child and not just academics but definitely the document prepares the child for entry into primary school.

Mr. Monroe: Okay, thank you very much. One follow-up question, would you say definitely the document is effective, and if so, how would you rate the effectiveness of that document, as per say, in terms of the results that it had brought forward thus far?

Mrs. Bhagwandin: So, we know that when our children enter into the primary school they are critical thinkers, they are good at creative writing, they socialize better with each other. So I would rate the document once implemented effectively,

it would have tremendous results, and we would definitely be meeting the target by having a well-rounded child transition into the primary school.

Mr. Monroe: Okay, thank you. My other question, is what steps would a private ECCE centre have to take to become a government-assisted school?

Mrs. Bhagwandin: We have public centres. Of course, we have the denominational centres. We have 21 denominational boards in Trinidad and Tobago currently, and a private institution belonging to any one of the denominational board, and is desirous of coming over to into the—to become a government-assisted centre, of course the application would have to be sent to the Ministry of Education once they fall under any one of the 21 denominational boards. So it would be sent to the Ministry of Education, consideration would be given, it would also inform the signing of a memorandum of understanding between both parties which would outline the responsibilities of the individual or the denominational body, and the responsibilities of the Ministry of Education.

Mr. Monroe: Thank you. Chairman, with your permission may I be allowed to ask one additional question please?

Mr. Chairman: Please, please do, go ahead please.

Mr. Monroe: Ministry of Education, once again I would like to ask a question. This one is more particularly to ECCE within the constituency of Toco/Sande Grande. I have had many interactions with two of those schools, one in the Vega area and one in the Cumana area, who have been having major challenges with the very same said infant children that we are speaking about. I would like to know, from the date of expressing their challenges to the Ministry, what is the time period

that the Ministry has set, or an outlined time period that the Ministry has in responding to the concerns of these early childhood centres? And I ask this question because I am aware that those centres indicated to me that they would have been reaching out and expressing their concerns, which I would not outline here now, but they are indicating that they have not had any positive response. I am not saying that no one responded, but the response was not positive in the best interest of the children.

Mrs. Bhagwandin: So, member Monroe, I am not sure what would have been communicated but without having more information, I would not be able to respond effectively.

Mr. Monroe: So can I ask that I do communicate with them as I usually do, and ask them to make a new expression of their concerns to the Ministry?

Mrs. Bhagwandin: Most definitely. I could provide my e-mail address as well as the division;'s e-mail address where persons are free to express concerns. And that way I will definitely be able to respond.

Mr. Monroe: Thank you very much.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you member Monroe. Just before I move on to the next—and thank you Ministry of Education for your answers—to the Ministry of Health. You know I may seem—excuse my mood sometimes and my intemperance because it is frustrating, because part of the remit of the committee is to find out what is working, what is not working, and provide recommendations for solutions. And while policy documents and procedural documents are fine, without data we cannot make an assessment as to what is working. We just cannot.

And part of the reason for the JSC also is to provide the public with a live overview of accountability and transparency as to what is working in their interest.

So, while providing documents to the Committee is a great avenue, the public does not get a chance to hear the data points. And the data points are very important for the public assessment as to what is working in their interest or not. So without the data points being broadcast live, it is really not in the interest of public accountability and transparency. But thank you for your answers. We move now to the Ministry of Health.

Ms. Mohit: Mr. Chairman, Mr. Chairman, before you move to Ministry of Health, can I just ask two quick questions?

Mr. Chairman: Yes please.

Ms. Mohit: Yes. Mr. Chairman in terms of our visits, you know, there were teachers who were assigned to ECCE centres for quite a number of years, and one of the things that was brought to our attention was that of pension accessibility. In terms of the Ministry of Education and their responses, I know you mentioned it is contract position, in terms of the teachers assigned and what not, but can you confirm whether any arrangements are being made, or any type of revision is taking place as it relates to these teachers who would have been assigned to these ECCEs contract after contract, after contract? Really to explain to us whether ECCE teachers can qualify for pension through the Ministry of Education like other teachers who are employed through the Ministry of Education.

Ms. Williams: So, if I may member Mohit, as is mentioned previously, teachers at the ECCE centres are on contract as opposed to being part of the established teaching service—permanent members of the teaching service. Permanent members of the teaching service will get pensions, contract officers get gratuities at the end of their contract.

Ms. Mohit: So, I understand that, I know that is the process. But any consideration being given? Because at the end of it, the ECCE centres it is contract positions, but these persons are working contract after contract after contract over a number of years. Are you working to get, you know, any type of established positions for them? Any revision taking place? What is happening with these persons?

Ms. Williams: So prior to the amendment to the Education Act, I mean it is still, remember it is still a proposal, it has not been approved by the Parliament or anything. However, the amendments include the insertion of well—yeah the inclusion of ECCE centres and special—ECCE teachers and special needs. So, perhaps consideration may be given in the future. Currently, at the end of each contract there is a 20 per cent gratuity. There may be a backlog, the Ministry is currently dealing with the backlogs to ensure that payments are received by officers.

Ms. Mohit: Mr. Chairman, just one final question. When we visited these ECCE centres in central and Port-of-Spain, et cetera, one of the things that we noticed was that there was an issue with how many students could have been taken in based on the academic year at these ECCE centres. There are quite a few ECCE centres which have not been opened, some somewhat—based on how it looks—abandoned. Can you say for us how many of those have not been opened, and when will you look at opening these, or if you have any plans to do so as soon as possible? So in some of these regions you can at least have an ease and persons can have more access to government-assisted ECCE centres.

Ms. Williams: Okay, so the Ministry has a number of centres which are under construction and are at various stages of completion, and we continuously work with the MTS to provide—to ensure that those centres are completed, and are opened and for

use by the members of the public.

Ms. Mohit: Okay. Can you state for us maybe in writing how many of those are there, and in which areas are they, because MTS mentioned they provide security and janitorial. So you are saying you are in continuous contact with them. Can you provide some figures for us and the estimated completion times, and when do you plan to open these so we can—these challenges of having accessibility to these government assisted, can be available to members of the public wishing for their children to enter ECCE centres?

Mr. Chairman: Thank you, member.

Ms. Williams: Chair, we would provide that information.

Mr. Chairman: Appreciate, thank you Ministry of Education.

11.30 a.m.

Thank you member Mohit for allowing us to provide questions to you. And we move on now to the Ministry of Health who are here, Doctors Fraser and Dookeran, to help us with our examination of assessment of the health and safety compliance of ECCE centers. Member Nakhid, go ahead please.

Mr. Nakhid: Thank you, Chairman. There is a submission from the Ministry of Health that has a report accompanying recommendations that was submitted to the County Medical Officer of Health for approval. What is the follow-up process to evaluate compliance with those recommendations?

Dr. Dookeran: Thank you member. Once a notice is served, a period of time would be given to comply with the notice. Usually, inspections are done prior to school closing in July so that the school will have sufficient time to comply with the notice and take the necessary corrective measures.

Once the notice is served, the schools will be revisited, usually in September

prior to school reopening to ensure that corrective measures are done. If the corrective measures are done, we are satisfied. We have no objections to the school opening in September. If the corrective measures are not done, then, a risk assessment is done to determine whether or not the threats are eminent to the children and the staff of the school.

If the threats are imminent, the County Medical Officer applies to the court for a closing order, or prior to that we normally recommend to the school principal that we have an imminent threat.

Mr. Chairman: What would constitute an imminent threat? What would constitute an imminent threat?

Dr. Dookeran: If we have issues such as if we have a toilet being flushed and sewerage backing up into the toilet bowl, overflowing in the toilet. If we have a septic tank overflowing and raw sewage is entering the environment, these things pose an immediate threat to the health and safety and well-being of the children.

Mr. Nakhid: Doctor, please, stick a pin. Before we get to those extreme parts, I would like to ask the question. How often do you check the schools? And are these checks random, or do you have to inform the school in writing before you go to the school?

Dr. Dookeran: So, as I said, usually we do at least two checks per year. So, our first check is usually done on the third term; that is just prior to school closing in July.

Mr. Nakhid: Is it a random check, Doc? What I am asking is, is it a random check?

Dr. Dookeran: Yes, we do random checks. We do not inform the Ministry. We visit the school and we ask the principals to accompany us during the inspection of the school. Yes.

Mr. Nakhid: But you stated that you do it on a specific period before the July closing. That is what you said. So, the schools would be aware that it would come

at that time, no?

Dr. Dookeran: Right. So, it would normally start from the beginning of the third term. So, sometimes anywhere between May, June, July. So, it does not have to be a; specific date during that period of time.

Mr. Nakhid: All right, but I notice that, from the Ministry of Education, there are some schools that they would not be allowed access. Do you have access to all; private and government schools?

Dr. Dookeran: Yes, we do. According to our laws, we can access all of them.

Mr. Nakhid: Okay. Thank you. So, you spoke about compliance you give them—

Dr. Dookeran: So, if the threat is imminent and we were pointing out some of the threats to the Chairman that may be construed as imminent threats, we can apply to the court for a closing order.

Outside of that, if the threats are not imminent; if they are moderate threats, we consider, we work with the Ministry of Education to rectify the defects, to correct the defects. But we also monitor to ensure that these defects do not escalate to imminent threats. Right.

In addition to that, if we do not have major threats in the school then we revisit at the next period, which is in the third term of the year again.

Mr. Nakhid: Well, Doc, in the interests of time, do you have any data as to how many of these schools that you have visited and you have found, as you say, imminent threats that you had to close down? Do you have any data for so, that we can inform the public? And separate between the private and the government ECCE centers? Because we saw on our visit there was a varying degree of what we consider standards, as you would know. So, do you have any data?

Dr. Dookeran: For the past year, we have not closed any schools, as our focus was more on COVID. And, of course, one of the concerns that we had with Covid was we should not have too much interaction or too much movement throughout the

schools. And, of course, prior to that, the two years prior to that we were shut down due to COVID. Years before that, I do not have data prior to 2020, which would have been the pre-COVID years.

So, again, during the last year, no schools were closed because of any imminent threat.

Mr. Nakhid: Okay, I guess then, you have a level of threat danger? You would have imminent threats. You would have intermediate threats, I guess, primary, thinking that concern you. How do you grade that?

Dr. Dookeran: Well, one of our concerns is that the inspections of the schools focus mainly on meeting the COVID regulations. So, we were focusing on making sure the schools had wash hand basins, soap and water, sanitizers. So, outside of the normal inspection, we would have identified some minor threats. We did not do a full inspection to determine those threats.

Ms. Mohit: Mr. Chairman, if I may? So, when do you plan to, outside of COVID, start back these visits and these assessments and inspections to ensure that these both are private and public and compliance?

Dr. Dookeran: As I said, inspections are done in the third semester, third term. Currently, we are undertaking inspections of not only ECCE schools, but also primary and secondary schools.

Mr. Nakhid: Well, Doc, since you spoke about there were no notices issued to close any schools but your visits are infrequent. I mean, they are not necessarily, in my opinion, enough. But, be that as it may, can the public who, including many of the parents, may notice that certain things are not up to standard, is there a channel for them to submit reports to you; if there any health violations notice?

Dr. Dookeran: Dr. Fraser would answer this.

Mr. Nakhid: Okay, please.

Dr. Fraser: Member Nakhid, Dr. Fraser. I am the current Country Medical Officer

of Health for just one of the counties in St. George East, but my experience is generally the same across all of the CMOHs. The County Medical Office of Health is the place that people would make complaints of any nature related to public health. And if they have a concern about a particular school, they will come into the office and make a complaint, or they will call to the office and make those complaints. So, it is generally by telephone or a walk-in process.

Mr. Nakhid: Has the public and/or the teachers, and/or the parents, have they been sufficiently educated by the county medical officer that that is an avenue open to them? I have not seen anything public awareness ads. I have not seen any information on social media to indicate such. Maybe you can help me.

Dr. Fraser: Well, generally that information, in terms of social media, would tend to be on the Ministry of Health's website. And usually when the public health inspectors make their visits on a regular basis to the schools, they will have that level of contact with the teachers or the members of the public at that time. So, generally, that is how the word gets out; nothing more than that. It is through personal interaction with the Public Health Inspectorate or on the Ministry of Health's website. Those are the two main ways that people are aware of what is happening.

Mr. Chairman: Can ask you to put a pause member Nakhid, because we have like 35 minutes and two entities to get through. So, if I could just ask you to put a pause for a minute please.

Just before I go to member Monroe, can you give us a sense, Ministry of Health of, before COVID, how many institutions you would have visited on an annual basis?

Dr. Dookeran: For ECCE schools, we have 150 on our current record. Note before that we had probably a few more that would have been closed during the Covid period. So, these 150 that we have on record, mainly the government schools, because the smaller ECCE schools are sometimes difficult to identify. So, we identify

these schools whilst our public health inspectors are working in their district doing work, not only on schools, but on school premises.

Mr. Chairman: No, we are asking how many schools would you visited before the pandemic started on an annual basis?

Dr. Dookeran: And the 150 that we have on register those would have been the ones that we would have visited.

Mr. Chairman: So, you visit all every year?

Dr. Dookeran: Yes.

Mr. Chairman: Do you have a number for the private institutions that are registered?

Dr. Dookeran: No, I do not have that number me.

Mr. Chairman: But you visit private institutions?

Dr. Dookeran: Yes.

Mr. Chairman: Okay. And what is your manpower like?

Dr. Dookeran: We have one Public Health Inspector to every 10,000 persons in the country. So, a county like St. George East, we have about 10 Public Health inspector Is, which would focus on the schools. Then we have the Public Health Inspector IIs, which focus on the school premises, and the Public Health Inspector III, who is the supervisor.

Mr. Chairman: Okay, thank you. Member Monroe, go ahead please.

Mr. Monroe: Thank you very much, Chairman. Question to the Ministry of Health. Your submissions state major defects, which require significant funding, often take much longer to correct due to the budgetary approval process. Can you provide some examples of major defects observed at the ECCE schools, which require significant funding?

Dr. Dookeran: Again, if we visit a school and there is a blocked septic soakaway system; the system is overflowing or whatever else, this requires, in our opinion,

significant funding. In addition, if a school is old and dilapidated, we normally ask the input of the Ministry of Works, Chief Design Engineer, and if they recommend that the school is a threat then, of course, we may apply for a closing order. Once a closing order is granted then, of course, you might need to rebuild the entire school or find an alternative building for the students. And, of course this is a significant cost as well.

Dr. Fraser: Member Monroe, if I were to add, one of the challenges, certainly we find with some of the private ECCE institutions is just adequate space to what needs to be done to house the number of children. And so expansion tends to be an issue. Additional toilet facilities that are needed to help with the actual numbers in those private institutions; those are some of the requirements we would have some of these institutions to provide. Those tend to require a significant outlay.

Mr. Monroe: Thank you. My other question, based on submissions by the Ministry of Health, which indicated that the Ministry of Health does not communicate with the school and the Ministry of Education to the schedule of an inspection, nor does the ministry communicate the findings of its inspection to the Ministry of Education. That is based on submissions by the Ministry of Health. I would like to know, is the Ministry of Education satisfied with the reporting arrangements, one? And two, should there be greater information sharing between both ministries with regard to any and all health issues affecting ECCE schools?

Dr. Dookeran: Can I make a correction, please? So, we do not communicate prior with the Ministry of Education to scheduling a visit to the school. Once an inspection is done, the defects are communicated to the teacher/principal that accompanied us immediately. And then, when we go back to our office, we write our report, we prepare our notice, which is signed by the medical officer of health, issued to the principal, and simultaneously a copy is issued to the Ministry of Education. So, we do communicate with them, with regard to the defects that were identified. But we

do not communicate with scheduling the inspection.

Dr. Fraser: And let me also say, member, while we are saying we do not communicate with scheduling, we are not required to communicate. But there is constant communication that takes place between the Public Health Inspectors and the schools; sometimes out of courtesy, sometimes it is for convenience. But there is a communication that takes place. But there is no requirement by law for us to inform the school that we are coming to have a visit. But there is communication that takes place sometimes.

Mr. Monroe: Okay. So, follow-up question. After such visits and reporting to the immediate persons who are at the school and to the Ministry of Education, of the issues and findings, what is the stipulated time frame that the Ministry of Health uses to revisit those very same schools to ensure that the matters were addressed?

Dr. Fraser: Well, I can say it depends on the extent of the issue. Quite often a two-week period is used for smaller issues. For larger issues, we certainly would be revisiting before the team is expected to restart, to ensure that the works that we have asked to be done are actually done. But the extent to which the time period further, we are depending on the extent of work that needs to be done. But anytime between two weeks to the beginning of the term tend to be the time we go back for a check to see what is happening.

Mr. Monroe: Thank you very much. Chairman, may you permit one quick question please?

Mr. Chairman: A quick one, a quick one. Yeah.

Mr. Monroe: I would also like to find out if, upon visit the situation is one that warrants the students to be relocated or be removed, what steps the Ministry of Health would ensure that the Ministry of Education and the schools carry out to ensure the safety of those students; let us say it is a life-threatening that you all stumble upon?

Dr. Fraser: In those situations, we would inform the principal of the school and recommend immediate closure or immediate relocation. And that would be followed by an actual official letter, not just to the school, but it goes right through the chain to our Permanent Secretary and the Ministry of Education. Those situations, I would say generally tend to be treated with agency by the Ministry of Education.

Mr. Monroe: Okay, thank you very much.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you member Monroe. Just before we move to Tobago, Tobago and MTS, thank you for your patience. We are coming to you next Tobago. Doctors Fraser and Dookeran, the education Ministry has indicated they have a policy document approved Cabinet, which will give them more resources to monitor more of the 600 private institutions. Do you have the resources for that kind of increasing in monitoring?

Dr. Dookeran: A quick answer is no. We always would appreciate an additional number of staff. However, we do try, because we monitor twice a year, our focus is on those schools during that period. So, we use all of our staff to monitor at that period. But, of course, remember our functions are not only on focusing on schools, but other functions as well.

Mr. Chairman: Okay.

Dr. Dookeran: If I may explain.

Mr. Chairman: Yes please.

Dr. Dookeran: So, the food programme is usually from January to March, that is where we try to get all of our food premises registered. So, during May to July, we do not have to focus as much on food so, then we can focus a little bit more on the space.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you so much. We move to Tobago next. Thank you Doctors Dookeran and Fraser.

And let us move to Tobago next. Thank you for holding. We had planned to

come to Tobago but circumstances prevented us. And who would not want to come Tobago? But we promise to come soon enough, because we were all excited to come to Tobago to visit you. But, of course, we were thwarted by unforeseen circumstances, but we promised to make a trip of it. Of course, enjoy the other delights of Tobago, including the beaches and the food and all of that.

Anyway, could you just give us an overview from the Assembly's perspective of what the lay of the land is in Tobago, regarding the Assembly and ECCE centers and the private centers and the numbers of those in existence in Tobago at the moment please?

Mrs. George-Edoo: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. So, as it stands, we have 12 Government and Government-Assisted centres, and we have a subjective figure for the private schools, because we do not believe we have all and that subjective number is 43. We believe there are more, but 43 are whom we have visited and sure that they are up and running.

Mr. Chairman: I know you have been listening to the conversation earlier on and the issue is not the compliance as much with the Assembly's schools, I am sure, as with the Government schools in Trinidad, but with the compliance issues with the private schools. What are some of the challenges you have noticed at the private institutions?

Mrs. George-Edoo: They are very similar to that in Trinidad. So, if and when you get it, you would recognize that they have similar challenges. A lot of them are at people's homes, under homes, rented facilities, and they have very similar problems that you have all explained this morning.

If I could jump in as well, the last time we chatted we spoke about the fact that we really needed those guidelines to sort of give us the teeth to be able to reel in these private sector personalities. Because even though we provide opportunities for teacher training, and so on, we do not have the legal teeth to force them to do it.

So we are very happy to embrace that new policy. But we do look forward to include that—

Mr. Chairman: Was there any consultation with Education Ministry in Trinidad regarding the formulation of that policy that may have included unique circumstances in Tobago?

Mrs. George-Edoo: I do not recall any such thing at all. And, Mr. Chairman, again, when we looked at a glance, because it a few weeks came to us, we have notices that Tobago was not, or the Division of Education was not listed as one of the regulatory bodies to say the preliminary inspections, and stuff like that. So it seems like all of it resonated in Trinidad, and so, we are trying to figure out how that is going to work. We were not part of the discussion and like we are not part of the policy, per se. So, we would really like to know.

Mr. Chairman: What would be some of the exigent circumstances that you think, based on your experiences and your training, would be unique to Tobago that needs to be considered in a nationwide document of that nature?

Mrs. George-Edoo: Well, I am thinking that the same community bond that you spoke of, that exists in Trinidad, exists even more in Tobago. Because the majority of our children went to private schools here. So, I believe the document should be able to have us here at the Division play a more integral role in supervising and looking at some of the situations, extenuating institutions, that would speak to the culture. Because here, the culture down at the west is different from the culture in the east. And there are things we would understand why it is so, that is very much different from Trinidad. So, in that respect, I think we should have some say.

Mr. Chairman: The education Ministry document, I am just summarizing here, spoke to registration. Are the 43 private institutions registered with the House of Assembly, Division of Education, Research and Technology?

Mrs. George-Edoo: From my knowledge, it is like a step-by-step process. The

process for us, since I have been sitting in this chair, is that the preliminary stuff is done and brought to us and we have to send it to Trinidad. I am not sure if any of that has changed, because we have not had much collaboration as to the new document and how things would go.

So, right now, Trinidad would have those figures. And I have asked for them, since our last JSC meeting, and I am still on hold waiting to find out how many persons in Tobago are actually so that we can go to them, include them, and so on.

Mr. Chairman: So, just to understand, they are not required to be registered with the Assembly, but they are required to be registered with the education Ministry, nationally? And you have had no sight of those that have registered with the education Ministry, so you could have some level-- is it that the education Ministry has oversight for Tobago private institutions also solely? Or is it a joint effort between the Assembly and the administration of Trinidad and Tobago for oversight of those private institutions?

Mrs. George-Edoo: I believe it is joint. I just believe communication and collaboration—

Mr. Chairman: Well, I do not know how it could be joint if you have not been given a list of the ones that have been registered, quite frankly.

Mrs. George-Edoo: Agreed.

Mr. Chairman: Are these funded in any way, partially or otherwise by the Assembly, or to your knowledge by the education Ministry in Trinidad?

Mrs. George-Edoo: No. The private?

Mr. Chairman: Yeah.

Mrs. George-Edoo: No.

Mr. Chairman: They are not.

Mrs. George-Edoo: The only thing we have stepped up on and improve on, espe-

cially since after COVID is including the private entities into our training and workshops. And those that have been registered long before are now part of the school feeding programme.

Mr. Nakhid: Chairman, can I interject, please?

Mr. Chairman: Go ahead member Nakhid, yes. Go ahead please.

Mr. Nakhid: Good day to all in Tobago. You stated that you had given notice to the Ministry of Education, I guess, as to some things that were needed by you. Can you give us a timeline when you indicated that you would need that please?

Mrs. George-Edoo: Since the last JSC meeting. So, it would have been about a month or so I have asked. So, I am still waiting, a month or two; since our last JSC meeting.

Mr. Nakhid: Okay. Well indicate for the public, the people of Trinidad and Tobago, what position this places your committee in. What position are you in now, that you are hampered/hindered from helping the children of these centres. What does that do?

Mrs. George-Edoo: As the technical officer said, it becomes difficult to enforce anything or to ask anything of the privates, especially if we do not know if you are registered if, you are part of the system. What you have? We do not know. So, what we try to do when we go is to cordially invite, ask, and many of them, because they know that ECCE is not part of the Education Act they blatantly refuse to give any information.

12.00 noon

Mr. Nakhid: Sorry, what is the last comment?

Mrs. George-Edoo: They refuse to give any information.

Mr. Nakhid: Chairman, I will like to—

Mr. Chairman: They are not legally bound to provide information to the Assembly Division is that correct? What you are saying?

Mrs. George-Edoo: Yes.

Mr. Chairman: Yeah, so they do not. I understand. The issue of the 12 Assembly administered centres, and from what you know of the 43 private, are there similar challenges with trained staff for special needs students as we have identified in Trinidad?

Mrs. George-Edoo: Yes, very similar. We have no special need teachers assigned to early childhood.

Mr. Chairman: Zero?

Mrs. George-Edoo: Zero.

Mr. Chairman: Assembly administered or private to your knowledge?

Mrs. George-Edoo: Yes.

Mr. Chairman: So how are students with special needs in Tobago being diagnosed or referred, diagnosed and or remediated if at all?

Mrs. George-Edoo: Right, so since COVID the very strapped Student Support Services is now extending their branch a little into early childhood. Now they are very strapped for staff. So we may have one person looking over. However, we have had a system over the years that have been working in the early childhood sector. So that, our teacher administrators have been advised and encouraged and trained via the TRHA people that would come into our training from time to time. When they see red flags, there are two institutions that they direct them to, that is the Childhood and Adolescent Centre where there are speech and language psychologist and stuff, as well as the clinic at the Scarborough Hospital.

And it has been working because we do not have the numbers that Trinidad has, so it has been working. It is very tardy, the same tardiness, the same going to the clinics and waiting all day, and all of that, that is similar. But those the two entities have been working for us and helping us out with the special needs thus far.

Mr. Chairman: And is the curriculum standardized with Trinidad for the Assembly-run early childhood care centres and the private ones to your knowledge in preparation for transition to primary school?

Mrs. George-Edoo: Well, that standardized has a different meaning to myself and what was explained this morning. Because what we have and I know that we have is a national curriculum guide. This guide spells out those five strands and all the other things that are necessary to be taught at the early childhood level. When the member of the committee asked about the regularization or the standardization of the curriculum, what went to my mind was what pertains in primary and secondary where it is really spelt out as to what happens and how a teacher plans and stuff like that.

The National Curriculum guide is not spelt out like that. So what we do is have regular training and workshop to break down the guide so that our teachers can understand how to formulate that big picture, and then break it down to what we call the curriculum web and all of that, and then down the lesson planning stage. So that is how we do it.

So to say standardized, everybody has that same curriculum guide, but I do not think the privates where many of them are not as qualified to read it and to understand it and interpret it, I am not sure it goes on down the line to them in the way it would go down the line to our teachers in the Government sector.

Mr. Chairman: And finally, for this round what kind of challenges does that pose? Given there is a peculiarity between Trinidad and Tobago where very often you may start your life in Tobago as a toddler, but your parent may send you to Trinidad to primary school. Am I incorrect?

Mrs. George-Edoo: No, you are not incorrect, you are correct.

Mr. Chairman: My mother is from Tobago so I am very aware of all these things. And if there are issues with the training of the teachers particularly in the private

institutions, are those children being prepared even with the five pillars and the guideline for transition to primary school in Trinidad and Tobago adequately in your opinion?

Mrs. George-Edoo: In my opinion, yes, many of them. But there are also many that I do not think are as prepared.

Mr. Chairman: In closing, what would you like to see happen in the midterm to long-term to help harmonize if that is the word, and improve the services at early childhood care centres in Tobago, whether they be administered by the Assembly or privately run?

Mrs. George-Edoo: In the long-term, we actually have serious resources that we need in Tobago. Very often we ask for significant amounts of resources because we know the needs. We know the HR needs, we know the monitoring and evaluation needs, we know the legal needs, et cetera, but we do not get the type of allocation that we look forward to in order to enhance our education sector.

In the long-term, we actually need three ECCE physical centres so we need funding. Because the size of the population is burgeoning especially in the west. We actually need those things. We need the special needs teachers. We have those put forward in our proposals for our budget for all levels of the education sector from ECCE right up. So we are looking at occupational therapists, we are looking at speech therapists, et cetera. So we have those requested.

We need greater communication with the Ministry of Education. We need to work together. All of the issues are very very large they are very big. But if we work together, if we respect each other and we communicate more we can overcome these things together. We are a stone's throw away from each other. We are looking forward to your visit to Tobago. We enjoy hosting you. We enjoy collaborating with you.

And I want to say on behalf of the degradation here we truly appreciate the

passion that was represented by the Chair, and members of the Committee. Because it says to us sometimes, you are a little despondent because you are working hard with the persons in the trenches and you do not think that it is going to be reflected in the Cabinet and so on. But we truly appreciate the depth of your questioning because you want to know if things with really happening on the ground, because that is what hurts us, the distance between policy and what we do. So we truly appreciate it. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: We appreciate you for taking the time to be with us and as I said before, what we do is just in the interest of transparency and accountability, and in the public interest, because very often the public is not going to a document to read they want to see it unfold before them, they want to hear what the issues are, they want to see how they can be a part of the solutions. So we appreciate your contribution and your time here this morning very, very, much. And we look forward to coming to Tobago to spend time to talk with you more on a one-on-one basis and communicate the issues so we could find solutions together.

MTS, thank you for being so patient. I apologize. Let me start with member Monroe because I know he has to leave us. Go ahead, member Monroe. Has he gone already?

Mr. Monroe: No. Thank you very much, Chairman, I am still here. One minute, please. Chairman, right. Thank you very much MTS for your patience. I would like to find out from you all today based on submissions stated that from the period September 2022 to May 2023, approvals from the Ministry of Education were received for 38 projects, of which 31 have been completed and seven are ongoing. The following questions are as follows: Can you name the schools where these projects are being done? One. Two, can you briefly indicate the type of remedial works and repairs that are involved? And three, are these remedial works and repairs expected to be completed in time for the start of the new academic year 2023/2024?

Mr. Rattansingh: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, member Monroe. Let me just at the outset indicate the process in which repairs are done via the Ministry of Education. It is not that MTS is contracted to perform services in all of the schools. The process is, is that the principal of these ECCEs will identify whatever issue that is ongoing with them, and that will be forwarded to the school supervisors and that will be forwarded to the Ministry of—EFFED Division of the Ministry of Education. And then, the Ministry of Education’s PS will communicate with me as to the requirement, scope, and cost of the job. When that is done, we will submit it to the PS Ministry of Education, and we await approval. We do not do anything without approval from the Ministry of Education.

So, from the period under discussion, MTS received 59 requests from the Ministry of Education to do scoping and costing. Of those 59, we would have submitted all 59 scopes and cost to the Ministry of Education, and would have gotten approval for 38 of those schools leaving 21 pending. And out of those 38 schools we would have completed between—by the time of preparation to now we completed an extra one, member Monroe, so we are now 32 completed and six outstanding.

The schools that we have completed and the school that we were requested to scope, it is an extensive list of 59. It is Salybia Government ECCE, Cap-De-Ville ECCE, and these are completed 100 per cent. Quarry Village, 100 per cent; Wallerfield, 100 per cent completed; Salybia Government, 100 per cent completed; Maraj Hill Government, 100 per cent, La Rufin, 100 per cent completed; Malabar Phase 4, 100 per cent, Buen Inento ECCE, 100; Harmony Hall, 100; Maraj Hill Government, that is another one, 100; Valencia Government, 100; St. Augustine North Government, 100; Valencia ECCE, 100; Bamboo Settlement, 100.

All the others I am going to mention here are is 100, so I would not say 100 again. Egypt; Oasis; Bamboo Settlement; Morvant Government; Monroe Road

Government; Brothers Government; Harmony Hall; Cuche Government; Penal; Quinam; Roystonia; Union Hall; Maraval; Fyzabad; Tacarigua; Quarry Village; Palmiste; and Buen Inento again, 100 per cent completed.

Mamoral ECCE, 30 per cent; La Puerta, 25 per cent; Chinapoo, 10 per cent. And we are working presently, the tender process was completed and we are working presently at Petit Valley Government, Maraval, St. Ann's, and Cunjal. Those we are working on presently, and the others, there are 21 remaining out of the 59 that we did not receive approvals for as yet.

Mr. Monroe: Okay. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. And I am happy that some of the schools in the north-east here that I heard you mentioned within the constituency of both Toco/Sangre Grande and Cumuto/Manzanilla are 100 per cent completed. And I am wishing you all the best and continue your hard work ensuring that our young children have proper schools to attend to. Thank you very much to you and MTS.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you member. Member Mohit, go ahead please. We just have a short time left, and then member Nakhid would be able to pose some questions. Go ahead please, member Mohit.

Ms. Mohit: Yes sure. Mr. Chairman, based on the submission you know it is noted that one of the main challenges that MTS faces is high receivables, meaning arrears owed by the Ministry of Education. Considering the debt currently owed to MTS, has the Ministry of Education indicated to you MTS, when these outstanding fees will be paid to you?

Mr. Rattansingh: Thank you very much, member. Receivables are always on top of our agenda. As you know, MTS does not receive a subvention from Government, and we require funding from our clients to pay salaries and to operationalize the organization. So the Ministry of Education is owing us in excess of \$350 million. Particularly, with respect to the ECCE, approximately \$20 million outstanding. And

as you know we only do 34 out of the 143 ECCE. So we just do a mere percentage of it.

The answer to the question is we have seen a marked improvement in the Ministry of Education for the year 2023. Most of these debts were accumulated prior to 2023, based on COVID and prior years when there were some recessionary issues in the country. We are working with the Ministry of Education, yes, and myself have been meeting regularly on these matters, and I am hoping and praying that these matters will be cleared up before the end of the year.

Ms. Mohit: Can I ask the Ministry of Education, Mr. Chairman, to comment on this matter in terms of when would outstanding fees be paid. I am hearing that they are working together, but in terms of the outstanding fees itself when would it be paid? Is it \$20 million you said?

Mr. Rattansingh: For the ECCE member, yes. For the ECCE \$20 million was submitted.

Ms. Mohit: Yes, Ministry of Education.

Ms. Williams: We will work together with MTS to ensure that the fees are paid in a timely manner.

Ms. Mohit: Mr. Chairman, in terms of information being made available to the public. We get that you both are working together to ensure that the payments are made. I expect that. We all expect that. Is it that you have the funding available from this financial year to make payment to MTS in the sum of this \$20 million? Or is it that you need to await the next financial year to be able to clear these arrears?

Ms. Williams: As funds are released, we make payments to the Ministry—sorry, to MTS based on invoices received.

Ms. Mohit: Can I ask whether MTS have submitted invoices to the Ministry of Education?

Mr. Rattansingh: Member, the answer to that question is that \$20 million receivables are based on invoices, sorry.

Ms. Mohit: Based on invoices submitted.

Mr. Rattansingh: Submitted.

Ms. Mohit: Ministry of Education, can you just for the purposes of this committee, you are stating that based on when releases are made available to you, and invoices submitted you would make payments. Do you have the allocation available in this financial year to make those payments if you are to receive releases? Or have you exhausted your allocation? And are awaiting releases?

Mr. Chairman: I think member Mohit is asking about for this purpose because I am presuming that releases would be under different heads or sub-Heads in the Ministry of Education.

Ms. Mohit: And of course, you would make your request to the Ministry of Finance based on your allocation available. So have you exhausted your allocation? Do you need to await the next financial year? Are you awaiting releases to do payments based on all of these invoices submitted? Because we are being told that the invoices have been submitted?

Ms. Williams: We will get updates through our finance and accounting division and we will provide them in writing to you.

Ms. Mohit: Mr. Chairman, can I move to my other question or would you like to make any comments on this?

Mr. Chairman: No, please do. Please.

Ms. Mohit: MTS again, your submission outlines recommendations and proposals submitted to the Ministry of Education to improve security services within the school sector. Notwithstanding your comments in your opening statement as per 34 ECCE centres you provide security services to and janitorial for one. Am I correct?

Mr. Rattansingh: Correct, member.

Ms. Mohit: Good. Can you indicate to this Committee what is the status of these proposals and where any of the proposals submitted to the Ministry accepted. And in addition to that, if you can tell us one time because I know we are running on time, what was the general response to the proposals from yourself to the Ministry as well as whether it was opposed or not? And if opposed, what were the main concerns identified by the Ministry of Education?

Mr. Rattansingh: Thank you member. I would pass that question to the head of our Marketing Division.

Mr. Gosine: Sure. Mr. Chairman, member, MTS is the major partner with the Ministry of Education and from time to time they request proposals. For example, they would request proposals to complement the manpower at schools, for example, primary schools, for example, ECCEs. And we would prepare these proposals and submit them. These proposals, a number of them would have been submitted over a period of time. For example, as we are focusing on ECCE centres here we would have done one to provide electronic security to complement our manpower at the ECCEs where we are at to support it with electronic security. And we work in conjunction with the Ministry and the approval is pending in most cases for some of these proposals.

Ms. Mohit: Can I have a comment on the Ministry of Education on this so I will know how to frame my next—

Mr. Chairman: Unfortunately, member Mohit, because we are out of time I am going to have to go to the questions from member Nakhid because we are running out of time because as you know there is a sitting this afternoon. So if the Ministry of Education could provide the response in writing we would appreciate that. It seems to be the way to go today. Member Nakhid, go ahead, please. Thank you, member Mohit.

Mr. Nakhid: Yes, indeed, Chairman, in writing. Okay. Well, let us get a bit specific. There was one submission that you made to the Ministry of Education about to place an office at the Penal ECCE at night in light of a break in there in April 2023, couple months ago. What was the outcome of this recommendation the MoE? Has an officer been placed at that specific ECCE centre to date?

Mr. Rattansingh: Thank you for the question, member. The answer is, no.

Mr. Nakhid: No? After almost three months? Have you any update from the Ministry as why that is so?

Mr. Rattansingh: Mr. Gosine, you have any update?

Mr. Gosine: We have notified them in writing and we speak to them, and up to this morning there is another meeting being held and this is on the agenda.

Mr. Nakhid: All right. Gentlemen, with all due respect you all are in charge of security—placed in charge of security for the children—

Mr. Chairman: Member Nakhid, Member Nakhid, they have taken the process as far as they can, let us—

Mr. Nakhid: No, no, wait Chairman, wait, Chairman, the question—

Mr. Chairman: No. You are not telling the Chairman to wait, Sir.

Mr. Nakhid: No, you have to let me finish my question.

Mr. Chairman: I am asking you, they have answered the question, please move on.

Mr. Nakhid: They have not answered the question. I have not finished my question.

Mr. Chairman: Member Nakhid, please move on.

Mr. Nakhid: I am not here at your service, Chairman. I am here at the service of Kamla Persad-Bissessar.

Mr. Chairman: Member Nakhid, I am not saying that you are not—*[Inaudible]* member Nakhid.

Mr. Nakhid: You have to let me ask my question. This is very unprofessional of you.

Mr. Chairman: Member Nakhid. Member Nakhid

Mr. Nakhid: I have to ask my question. I would like to know why after three months that these people who are in charge of our security, what is going done to make sure that something has been placed in Penal? I would like that answered. They said they took the process to the Ministry of Education, I am asking what it is the follow up? You cannot stop me from asking that question. I would like—[*Inaudible*]

Mr. Chairman: Member Nakhid, your tone needs to be amended. Let us start with that.

Mr. Nakhid: I will not amend anything, Chairman. I am speaking to the people in charge of security. You could have let the question go, but you cannot want to take the limelight. Take the limelight. Thank you. I take my leave.

Mr. Chairman: And as the Chair, and as the chair, I have the remit to manage these proceedings. Member Mohit, do you have any other questions?

Ms. Mohit: Not at this time, Chairman.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much. To the Members of the MTS team can you tell us what are the major threats you encounter while doing your duties at the institutions?

Mr. Gosine: Mr. Chairman, the environment that the security operates in today is vastly different from the environment that we operated in previously, and there are new threats that have emerged. One of the major threats is school violence. Another threat is break-ins. And a third threat is the introduction of illegal drugs in the school sector.

Mr. Chairman: Is this in specific reference to early childhood care centres or generally at schools?

Mr. Gosine: The school sector, Mr. Chairman. The ECCEs are different from the managing in the primary school sector and different from the secondary schools.

Mr. Chairman: And are there specific issues related to ECCE centres as this is the

point of this enquiry?

Mr. Gosine: The majority of issues are similar but we take special care in the ECCEs, especially with ingress and egress, and where visitors are concerned. We tend to look at those areas more tightly and tend to make sure you have a rigid appointment system in the ECCEs.

Mr. Chairman: And in terms of security concerns are there requests for more security at specific locations or is it a general request based on the threat and the risk assessments provided at these centres nationwide?

Mr. Gosine: Good question, Chair. Request for security comes from far and wide. There are a number of areas which you have classified together and in conjunction with the Ministry of Education as at risk, and one would tell they get more requests for more security to be implemented at those locations and schools.

Mr. Chairman: And what about the protocols, the evacuation protocols? Are you in charge of those things or as a security consultant? Or is it that those are done by the schools themselves?

Mr. Gosine: We work in conjunction with the principals and there are some areas where we assist with including a scope of works under fire protection and prevention including evacuation emergencies, conducting routine checks on fire extinguishers, as well as the identification and elimination of fire hazards, and submit monthly reports on fire extinguisher inspection. So the answer to your question is yes, we assist.

Mr. Chairman: All right. Thank you so much. Unfortunately, we have run out of time we going to have to go through with closing comments starting with the Education Ministry, your closing comments please.

Ms. Williams: Chair, we would like to thank you for the opportunity for allowing us to come to share our experiences and information that we have, our policy, our

new developments within the ECCE sector, and we commit to providing the information that we have not been able to submit to you in writing. And we look forward to working with all the stakeholders towards the development of the education sector and in particular the ECCE subsectors.

Mr. Chairman: Well, thank you for your presence and your contribution. I would hope in the future that we could provide more actual data because this is about in part public scrutiny. Thank you for your presence. To the Ministry of Health, your closing comments please.

Mr. Dookeran: The Ministry of Health also thanks you for giving us the opportunity to be part of this discussion on ECCE early childhood centres. I hope we addressed your concerns effectively. So thank you once again for the opportunity.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you so much. And to the Tobago House of Assembly-Division of Education, Research and Technology.

Mrs. George-Edoo: Thank you so kindly for the rigorous examination of our sector because we owe it to our public and to our next generation of children. Thank you and we look forward to seeing you in Tobago and —[*Inaudible*]

Mr. Chairman: Thank you so much for the invitation. And last but by no means least the National Maintenance Training and Security Company Limited, MTS.

Mr. Rattansingh: Thank you very much Mr. Chairman, for the opportunity given to us to present our intonation to this committee, and we stand throughout looking forward serving the committee in any of its deliberations in the future. Thank you very much.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you to all the stakeholders who appeared in this session and previously. We would like to also present special appreciation and thanks to the institutions that invited and accommodated us. They were quite gracious in welcoming us and answering our questions both the two Government, and the private, and government-assisted early childhood care centres. On behalf of members of the

Committee, those who were with us today and those who were not able to be with us, and of course the fine work of the Parliament Secretariat to help us get these proceedings off the ground. We thank you for viewing and wish you a wonderful and safe day. This session is now adjourned.

12. 29 p.m.: *Meeting adjourned.*