



Summary of Proceedings

Public Hearing

Held on **Wednesday March 17, 2021** from **10:20 a.m. to 12:49 p.m.**

Subject matter: An Inquiry into the effects of the hybrid learning system on student performance in government and government-assisted schools during the revised COVID-19 restrictions.

Venue: Virtual via the Zoom platform

Committee Members

The following Committee Members were present:

- Mr. Paul Richards
- Mr. Esmond Forde, MP
- Mr. Avinash Singh
- Mr. David Nakhid
- Mr. Roger Munroe, MP
- Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh, MP
- Mrs. Penelope Beckles, MP

The following Committee Member was excused:

- Mr. Rohan Sinanan

Witnesses who appeared

The following officials appeared before the Committee:

Ministry of Education

- Mrs. Lenor Baptiste-Simmons Permanent Secretary
- Ms. Mary Bastien Coordinator, Guidance and Counselling

- Mrs. Leticia Rodriguez-Cupid Coordinator, Special Education

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

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

Private Special Schools Association

- Ms. Phillis Griffith President
- Dr. Shara Zoe Ordinary Member

Support Autism Trinidad and Tobago (SATT)

- Dr. Radica Mahase Director/Founder

Down Syndrome Family Network

- Ms. Lisa J. Ghany Honorary Board Member

Trinidad and Tobago Blind Welfare Association

- Mr. Kenneth Suratt Executive Officer

Association of Administrators of Public Special Schools Trinidad and Tobago

- Mr. Derrick Mundy President

Consortium of Disability Organizations (CODO)

- Ms. Jacqueline Leotaud President

Audrey Jeffers School for the Deaf

- Ms. Veronica John Principal

Princes Elizabeth Special School

- Mr. Gerard Frederick Principal

Cascade School for the Deaf

- Ms. Francisca Monsegue Principal

Key Issues Discussed

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

Student Support Services Division (SSSD)

- i. The Students Support Services Division is a school-based service. As such, a child needs to be enrolled in school as a pre-requisite for referral.
- ii. The SSSD is currently 20% staffed;
- iii. Cases referred to the SSSD:

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

Training on Special Needs

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

Online Classes and Printed Packages

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

Inclusive Education

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

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

Special Needs Schools in Tobago

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

Student Support Services

- iii. Special Education Teachers and Guidance Officers interact with special needs students who attend mainstream schools in Tobago.
- iv. The need for Teachers Aides at mainstream schools for special needs students who attend mainstream schools.

- v. The Digicel Foundation has donated devices for special needs students. However, not all students are equipped with the knowledge of how to use the devices for learning.
- vi. The Division has been training parents to assist their children with interfacing and accessing virtual learning tools via the donated devices.

Assessments

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

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

General Information

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

Education System

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

Assessments

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

Support of the Network

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

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

General Information:

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

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

General Information:

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

Teachers Aides

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

Recommendations

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

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

General Information

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

Support for Special Needs Schools

- ii. The need for appropriate health and safety infrastructure against COVID-19 to be installed for public special schools.
- iii. The need for individualized education programme to meet the needs of special needs students.
- iv. The need for a specialized unit to focus on providing support for special needs school.

- v. There is currently no Braille Production Unit at the School for Blind Children.
- vi. The average cost of screen reader software for devices is \$6,000.00.
- vii. There must be School Supervisors who are aware of the unique needs of special schools
- viii. The MOE needs to assign a curriculum officer specifically for Special Schools.
- ix. Workshops are not enough, there is a need for postgraduate degrees that provide training in the area of educating special needs students.

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

General Information

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

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

General Information

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

Devices

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

Assessments

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

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

General Information

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

Student Support Services

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

Training

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

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

General Information

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

Devices

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

Student Support Services

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

Teaching and Assessments

- iii. Summative and project-based assessments have been used to assess special needs students.
- iv. The schools had adapted the MOE guidelines for the blended learning system to the needs of their students.
- v. Teachers have been engaged in bi-weekly peer support sessions where they share best practices in using the online learning environment.
- vi. Learning sign language is not enough to work with deaf and hearing impaired students, there are specific ways to teach these students.

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

General Information

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

Teaching Methods

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

Access to Education Resources:

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

This public hearing can be viewed on demand via our YouTube Channel.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iGBrj7gzY00>

Contact the Committee's Secretary

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Committees Unit

March 22, 2021.