



Summary of Proceedings

Public Hearing

Held on **Wednesday April 21, 2021** from **10:17 a.m. to 12:31 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. Rudranath Indarsingh, MP
- Mrs. Penelope Beckles, MP
- Mr. Rohan Sinanan

The following Committee Member was excused:

- Mr. Roger Munroe, MP

Witnesses who appeared

The following officials appeared before the Committee:

Ministry of Public Administration and Digital Transformation

- Mr. Claudelle McKellar Permanent Secretary (Ag)

- v. The MPADT intends to set up an additional 13 ICT Access Centres during the current fiscal year. MPADT will be responsible for 8 of these centres while TATT will be responsible for the remaining 5 Access Centres;
- vi. Areas to be targeted for these centres include Beetham Gardens, La Pastora, La Horquetta, Lopinot, Toco, Roxborough, Moruga and Fifth Company. The remaining Centres will be determined at a later date.

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

Liberalisation of the Telecommunications and Broadcast Sector

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

Role in Providing Devices and Connectivity to Students

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

Research and Public Education

- ix. The last Digital Divide Survey was conducted in 2013/2014.

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

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

Market Overview

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

Role in online education

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

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

Market Overview

- i. Digicel has been operating in Trinidad and Tobago for fifteen (15) years
- ii. In 2016, the company brought additional broadband infrastructure to Trinidad and Tobago
- iii. The company offered over \$170 million in relief during the Covid-19 pandemic
- iv. Digicel provides fixed connectivity to over 84% of households and mobile coverage to over 98%
- v. In the past 2 months there has been a growth in consumption on the Digicel network as follows:
 - 56% increase in fixed network usage;
 - 64% increase in mobile data usage;
 - 18%-20% increase in mobile data per user; and
 - 46% increase in fixed network usage per user.
- vi. Digicel's ability to provide reliable service has been hampered by power outages as well as fibre breaks.

Online Safety

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

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

Market Overview

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

Role in Online Education

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

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

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iGBrj7gzY00&list=PL-SY0ndJDfa5LAYQn79awq-7kflN3BqX6&index=3&ab_channel=ParlView

Contact the Committee's Secretary

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Committees Unit

April 30, 2021.