EDUCATION FOR ALL – CHILDREN & YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES  
(09/07/13)

The Minister of Social Security, National Solidarity and Reform Institutions (Mrs S. Bappoo): Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, with your permission, I wish to make a statement on the matter raised by the hon. Third Member for Curepipe & Midlands on the urgent need to address the situation of children and youths with disabilities within the perspective of education for all.

Firstly, the NGO Trust Fund was set up under the aegis of my Ministry in 1999 for the provision of grant-in-aid to NGOs including those dealing with the disabled children.

With regard to the payment of a Carer’s Allowance to children with disabilities, I must point out that there are two categories: one concerning children with mild to moderate disability and the other concerning children with severe and multiple disabilities.

Regarding the children with mild to moderate disability, the income ceiling is presently Rs150,000, and as for those with severe and multiple disabilities, the ceiling which was Rs200,000 in 2000 was raised to Rs250,000 in 2006.

We are conscious of the fact that both of these ceilings need to be revised in the light of the on-going developments and, in this connection, a committee has been set up in my Ministry to work on concrete proposals to be submitted to the Ministry of Finance in the context of the next budget exercise.

In addition, I would like to mention that since 2007, we are providing new and additional allowances for bed-ridden children, children who have severe problems and those who are incontinent. Most of them benefit from all the 3 allowances of Rs 408 each and this amounts to Rs1224 which is paid on top of their Social Aid.

Furthermore, this year we are paying an additional allowance of Rs750 for a child with disability whose parents’ income does not exceed Rs6,200 monthly and who registers a 75% attendance at school.

We have also extended free domiciliary medical visits to these children, that is, children with severe disabilities since 2010.

Lastly, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, regarding the refund of transport costs for disabled children - despite the fact that transport is free for such children since 2005, but in a spirit of solidarity, my Ministry refunds the cost of full bus-fare to accompanying parents of severely disabled children also. This Policy enables parents to meet the cost of travelling expenses by van for the children up to around 90% of their budget.
The above measures clearly show, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, that we effectively care for the well-being of disabled children and we are committed to enhancing their access to education as a matter of right.

Thank you.

**The Deputy Speaker:** Hon. Minister of Education and Human Resources.

**The Minister of Education and Human Resources (Dr. V. Bunwaree):**

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, with your permission, I also wish to make a statement on the issue raised by the hon. Third Member of Curepipe/Midlands, regarding the urgent need to address the situation of children and youth with disabilities within the perspective of education for all subsequent to my reply on 02 July 2013 as Members will recall.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I highlighted some of the measures taken, which revolve around the four major thrust areas that guides SEN policy – Special Education Need policy. These are -
(i) increased and improved access to schools;
(ii) partnership with NGOs;
(iii) capacity building and support services, and
(iv) the adoption of international best practices.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I spoke on measures taken by both my Ministry and the Ministry of Social Security, National Solidarity & Reform Institutions regarding the issue of increasing and improving access. I need to emphasise some additional measures in this issue.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, the House will appreciate that I am providing the information to indicate that we, at the Education Ministry, are going the extra mile so as to capture all the learners, such that they are given the same opportunities for quality education.

I must highlight that there exists a database for SEN Children at my Ministry. This is being constantly updated in view of the emergence of new cases. In a concrete manner, my Ministry carried out a survey in all primary, secondary and SEN schools last year and the data are being cleared.

The House will appreciate that it is not an easy task to capture all children with disabilities as it is a constant struggle to encourage parents not to see a disability as a stigma. We have to put in a big effort to bring the disabled away from their cloistered existence that had been their fate for a long time. We must also work on societal mindset change: without this, we will only further condemn children with disabilities to remain within four walls.
Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, the Government has always worked in collaboration with NGOs operating in the SEN Sector, and my Ministry will continue to seek the support of these NGOs as privileged partners. Indeed, caring for those with disabilities is a national concern and I am the first to recognize the contribution of our partners.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, our goal is to move towards a situation that is almost normative in highly developed countries. There, children with serious disabilities are also mainstreamed instead of finding themselves in special schools. I concur that we are not there yet but the determination is there. The movement has already started and is on but this takes time; it requires resources - financial, human and otherwise. But then, this is where we recognize that, while it is the cardinal responsibility for the State to provide education for all, it is also true that this country has a history of partnership with private providers for Special Education.

Let me put the record straight. It is common knowledge that all SEN Schools run by NGOs registered with my Ministry are benefiting from a Grant-in-Aid. The review of the grant-in-aid formula last year by the Office of the Public Sector Governance (OPSG) has resulted in an increase in the budget from Rs26.4 in financial year 2011 to Rs 30.4m for financial year 2013.

The NGOs also benefit from assistance from the NGO Trust Fund in the form of an annual grant-in-aid. The total grant-in-aid provided by the Trust Fund amounts to some Rs12 m. annually. It also funds micro-projects of these NGOs with a view to strengthening their capacity.

As regards APEIM, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I am informed that it caters for some 257 children with disabilities. These children are mostly accommodated in Government Integrated Units. APEIM is not the only NGO engaged in the education of children with special education needs. There are 37 others that are equally active and registered with my Ministry. While reviewing the grant-in-aid, the concerns of all these 38 NGOs are being looked into.

Recently, representations have been received regarding the insufficiency of the amount of assistance provided under the Grant-in-Aid scheme. On 03 May 2013, my Ministry approached the Office of Public Sector Governance (OPSG) to review the grant-in-aid formula to provide for differentiated funding for the different categories of impairment. The OPSG, in its reply, dated 22 May 2013, requested my Ministry to set up a Committee, to assess the categories of impairments of children attending SEN schools requiring additional expenditure in terms of grant-in-aid. The OPSG has also informed that it will provide assistance as member to that Committee.
My Ministry, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, has accordingly set up a Committee to review the Grant-In-Aid formula with a view to catering to the differentiated needs of children with disabilities.

All the NGOs have already been invited to submit their proposals and are being invited to depone before the Committee. As at date, 24 proposals have been received and 5 NGOs including APEIM have already deponed before the Committee. The financial situation of all the NGOs is not in the red zone. Many NGOs have expressed satisfaction both verbally and in writing regarding initiatives taken by my Ministry to address this issue.

Let me also inform the House that the same Committee will also look at the norms and standards and quality assurance in SEN schools.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I consider it equally important to also inform the House that my Ministry has approached the National Remuneration Board through the Ministry of Labour, Industrial Relations and Employment to regulate and prescribe the salaries and conditions of service of all staff working in NGOs running SEN schools.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I will now come to the third policy thrust: Capacity Building and Support services for SEN Sector - It is understood that SEN is a sector that necessitates a building and strengthening of capacity for efficient and effective intervention actions. It is in this context that the MIE, the training arm of my Ministry, has run and is running various courses for different categories of officers from the level of Lecturers, Educational Psychologists, Educational Social Workers, Teachers, Educators and also courses for parents and carers.

I will spell out some of these ongoing courses -
(i) Post graduate Diploma in Special Education for lecturers of MIE, educational psychologists and educational social workers;
(ii) Certificate in Special Education for teachers working in the SEN Sector, including NGOs;
(iii) Teachers’ Diploma in SEN for primary school teachers;
(iv) Teachers’ Licence in SEN for teachers already working in SEN schools.

In order to ensure sustainability, the MIE will continue providing the appropriate courses, after constantly enriching them. Yet another innovation brought to the Diploma Course being dispensed by the MIE to all trainee teachers for the mainstream is a module on SEN, which empowers them to profile the children for an early identification of impairment.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, we are adapting the curriculum of the mainstream to cater for children with hearing and visual impairment.
The Mauritius Institute of Education is reviewing the curriculum and they will take on board, as usual, our partners, the specialist NGOs, with a view to benefiting from their expertise.

For such other types of impairments, as autism, dyslexia, intellectual and physical impairment, the MIE has been requested to develop and adapt curricula, so that at the end of their education cycle, these learners are in presence of a certificate which will raise their self-esteem and eventually help them become independent in life.

On another note, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, we have to respond to the different learning needs of children with disabilities. In fact, we have to ensure that the right kind of equipment is provided to them for their overall development. Assistive devices and, as far as possible, state-of-the-art technology have to be placed at their disposal.

True, this will require some investment; but because even children with disabilities have to learn in a modern way, we simply have to make this investment, and we are already moving in the right direction.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, here, let me inform the House that, as per the Government Programme, all children with visual impairment will soon be provided with a Braille PC.

Tenders have already been launched and if everything goes smoothly by the end of October 2013, this measure will be implemented.

I must also inform the House that the new grant-in-aid formula, which was revised last year, provision is made for the grant of 5% of the total grant-in-aid for specialised equipment and furniture.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, my Ministry has embarked on the setting up of five Resource and Development Centres at Ferney, Beau Bassin, Plaine des Papayes, Flacq and Rivière des Anguilles. These centres will provide proximate services to children with disabilities according to their needs.

The main objective of SEN Resource and Development Centres is to reach out to children who require Special Education Needs, especially children living in areas where there are no such facilities, and to operate as a one-stop-shop to provide specialised and relevant services and support to SEN children.

Let me inform the House, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, that, with effect from 10 June 2013, the SEN Resource and Development Centre at Ferney has had a soft take off with the active collaboration of APDA and Lizié dan la main.
Two other SEN Resource Development Centres at Beau Bassin and Plaines des Papayes will be operational as from the third term of this year, with the collaboration of NGOs registered with my Ministry.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, with a view to profitably gain from the experience and good practices already taking place in some countries, my Ministry has sought the assistance of other countries.

In this context, a study visit by officers working in the SEN sector of my Ministry was effected in Norway in June 2011 to gain exposure to the state of play of SEN in that country, and for deeper insight into the operation of Resource and Development Centre for Special Needs.

Equally, a Consultancy Assignment was conducted by the European Union on the organisational set-up and functioning of the SEN Sector. With the assistance of the European Union, a Train the Trainers Workshop was organised for some 37 professionals with the objective of enhancing capacity building in the SEN sector, with focus on visual impairment, hearing impairment and dyslexia.

My Ministry is also working with the EU for further training in other areas, namely autism, physical and intellectual impairment.

The French authorities - Reunion essentially - have been approached to share their expertise in the field of SEN. An Avenant setting the modalities of the cooperation framework between Reunion and Mauritius was signed in December 2011. I must say that a team of three officials was in Reunion Island week before last week to benefit from the French expertise in the running of SEN Resource Development Centres.

In conclusion, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I must say that I am appreciative of the hon. Member having spoken on this issue. Certainly, it was also an opportunity for our fellow countrymen and women to know what are the several actions already undertaken and/or targeted.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, true it is that in 2010 I stated that, I quote -

“There is still much to be done”.

True also it is that lots have been done since 2010, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir. And that will continue to be the case because this is a sector that poses new challenges on a daily basis.

Children with special needs demand an approach that is both humane and guided by goodwill. It cuts across all barriers, and I couldn’t agree more...
The Deputy Speaker: Hon. Jhugroo, don’t interrupt the Minister!

Dr. Bunwaree: And I am speaking of children requiring special education needs.

(Interruptions)

It cuts across all barriers, and I couldn’t agree more that it certainly is a non-partisan issue. It behooves us, therefore, to ensure that the interests of these children prime above any other consideration.

Inclusion and integration to facilitate adaptation, Mr Deputy Speaker Sir, should become the bywords that should – and do guide us, in fact – our commitment to those children who will become the full-fledged citizens of tomorrow.

Mr Deputy Speaker Sir, I believe nobody can possibly gainsay the fact that our country has made a big leap ahead in the endeavour to make of children with disabilities full-fledged citizens of the country. In our genuine conviction to provide education, and specially quality education for all, we are unflinching in our doing to ensure that no child with a disability of any kind is left behind.

Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir.

The Minister of Gender Equality, Child Development and Family Welfare (Mrs M. Martin): Mr Speaker, Sir, with your permission, I wish to make a statement on the matter raised in the National Assembly by the hon. Third Member for Curepipe & Midlands on Tuesday 02 July 2013 on the urgent need to address the situation of the “Children and youth with disabilities” within the perspective of “Education for All”.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, the Republic of Mauritius acceded to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) on 26 July 1990. Government, as a body, is highly committed to protecting and upholding the rights of all children. And they also include children with disabilities.

Article 23 of the CRC provides, inter alia, for the disabled child to have the right to special care and services, education, assistance and training, to help him or her enjoy a full and decent life in dignity, and achieve the greatest degree of self-reliance and social integration.

In line with the Articles of the CRC, Government adopts a child-centred approach with a view to enable stakeholders to bridge the gap in services and activities for the welfare of children. My Ministry works with actors fostering a common vision of the Mauritian child. The actions of THE CDU are based on the five themes of the CRC which are: Survival, Protection, Participation, Development and Welfare of Children. Our
programmes and projects are geared towards ensuring that resources are directed towards the attainment of this common vision. All children of Mauritius, irrespective of whether they are disabled or not, are children of our Republic, and we endeavour to provide them with support, as appropriate.

Children with disabilities are a cross-cutting issue which is considered in policies, plans of actions, programmes and activities of my Ministry. Education, more so for children with disabilities, is viewed as multipronged and wide encompassing, not only academic. For example, the Early Childhood Development Policy Paper, prepared by my Ministry in collaboration with UNICEF as far back as in 1998, is geared towards enhancing the development of children of the age cohort of 3 months to 3 years.

This Policy Paper provides for the integration of children with special needs into regular institutions. This is also mentioned in the Institutions for the Welfare and Protection of Children, Regulations 2000, under the Child Protection Act, whereby Managers have to ensure that adequate facilities are available for children with disabilities.

It is easier in the early years of development of a child to detect forms of disability and initiate corrective measures, if any. My Ministry is currently consolidating a database on institutions providing child care services that will also include details on children with disabilities. This information will form the basis for the formulation of appropriate policies as regards these children.

It is to be pointed out that at the time of registration of Child Day Care Centres, my Ministry ensures that the norms and standards are respected and that the carers are equipped with the required skills to identify and cater for children with slight disabilities. The training is provided by para public and private institutions.

More specifically, as regards the aspect of protection, the National Children’s Policy and its Plan of Action, elaborated by my Ministry in 2003 and 2004 respectively, cater for all reported cases of children victims of violence as well as disabled children removed from their immediate environment and placed under court order in alternative care, be it foster families or shelters or Child Residential Institutions. The protection services offered to all children victims of violence, including disabled ones, comprise counselling, medical, psycho-social and legal assistance as well as family rehabilitation programmes. Presently, there are 516 children placed under Court Order in 19 Child Residential Institutions. Out of which, 11 institutions are accommodating 41 children, 17 boys and 24 girls with disabilities.

It is to be pointed out that Child Residential Institutions, by virtue of their concept and philosophy are meant to be temporary shelters, for a priori, the main objective of the Ministry is to reunify these children with their rehabilitated families.
I would like to reassure hon. Obeegadoo that my Ministry endeavours to provide a sense of normalcy to all children in distress, including children with disabilities. For example, we take into account the nature of disability of the child under our care when making arrangements for their schooling.

The degree of the disability is also considered when decision is taken, whether to integrate the child in mainstream education or institutions with specialised care.

There are 38 children who attend nine specialised schools. All efforts are made for the children to attend schools nearest to their residential institutions. Regarding those with heavy impairments, necessary arrangements are made with the institutions to provide for in-house rehabilitative activities.

My Ministry undertakes follow-up in those institutions with a view to ensuring that the needs of these children are met. To strengthen the monitoring mechanism at the level of both, Child Day Care Institutions and Child Residential Institutions, my Ministry is proposing to set up an Enforcement Unit staffed with Enforcement Officers who will carry out regular inspections to ensure that norms and standards are met, including those related to disabled children. The scheme of service of the Enforcement Officer has been worked out and the clearance of the Ministry of Civil Service and Administrative Reforms will be sought soon.

In addition to educational measures, the overall development of the disabled child is also looked into. My Ministry collaborates with various stakeholders to ensure access to recreational and leisure activities to these children.

My Ministry promotes the social integration of children with disabilities in the 22 children’s clubs across the island. At the Mahebourg Creativity Centre, children actively participate in creative, social and recreational activities, thereby enhancing their overall development.

The Child Protection (Amendment) Act 2005 provides for higher penalties, to the tune of Rs100,000 for sexual offences committed on victims with intellectual impairment and penal servitude not exceeding 30 years. The forthcoming Children’s Bill will also make provision for protection and development of disabled children, including higher penalties for perpetrators of violence against these children who are particularly vulnerable.

Furthermore, I would like to inform the hon. Member, that under the Special Collaborative Programme for Support to Women and Children in Distress put in place since 2009 at my Ministry, NGOs providing services to children with severe disabilities have received funding. This is done with a view to enhancing the livelihoods of children and integrating them into mainstream development. For the period 2010-2013, 20 such
projects have been approved for a total sum of Rs16.8 m. Twenty NGOs supporting 900 children with all forms of disabilities have benefitted from this Programme. I thank you.