



MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

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MINISTER OF EDUCATION

**Response to Debate on Violence
in the Senate**

Tuesday 22nd May, 2007

Madam Speaker, when this Government took office in 2002, violence and indiscipline in schools had been an ongoing issue. A National Consultation had been held in 1988 and there were reviews that had taken place since then. The nature and extent of indiscipline in schools at that time had been defined as follows:

- inattention and disruptive behaviour in class
- thefts
- fights in schools and among students of different schools
- use of various kinds of weapons
- attacks on students by students and non-students in and out of school
- drug abuse
- sexual misconduct
- threats of attacks on teachers
- verbal sexual harassment of female teachers
- violent, physical attacks on teachers
- Attacks on the self, for example attempted suicide.

Incidents of violence and indiscipline were not limited to any one type of school or to particular geographical areas. It was noted at that time, however, that indiscipline serious enough to disrupt schools or reach the extremes of violence was evident only among a small minority of students even in the most troubled schools. The general impression was that the majority of the school population displayed positive behaviour.

This report made certain recommendations which this government met in various stages of implementation when it took office. Some of these identified for immediate implementation included:

- The mounting of weekly, regional parent-education seminars.
- Action to increase principals' knowledge of regulations and the law.
- The formation of special inter-disciplinary team to address problems affecting our most troubled students (one team per school)
- Prompt filling of vacancies for principals, vice principals and teaching posts

- Addressing the pastoral needs of students to reduce the risk of indiscipline
- Establishing/reinforcing student representative councils
- Well organized assemblies with student participation.

More long-term recommendations included:

- Intensification of the Family Life Education Programme
- Ending of the shift system
- Filling of all vacant posts of Guidance Counsellors
- After putting support system in place, instituting continuous evaluation of educators at all levels
- Ongoing training for practicing teachers.

These, Madam Speaker, were just some of the many unfulfilled recommendations that were advocated to reduce violence and indiscipline, when this Government took office. Committees were formed but very little else was done.

In 2002/03, The Ministry of Education moved expeditiously to pull together all the various activities into a co-ordinated Project called Project Peace. The major goal of this project was to create a culture of peace in the individual, school, family and community at large. A Co-ordinator was immediately appointed. This Project began to address, redevelop and implement various activities to reduce violence and indiscipline in schools.

The Ministry of Education also recognized that effective planning and implementation must be based on careful studies and not just exaggerated events in the media. So immediately the Ministry of Education commissioned Professor R. Deosaran - the goodly Senator on the Independent Benches - and his team to study and analyse violence and indiscipline in schools. The study was extended in 2005 and Madam Speaker my Ministry of Education now has a very clear understanding of the nature of violence and indiscipline in our schools.

Permit me to share this with this Honourable House and the national community as a whole. A sampling of two thousand, seven hundred and sixty (2,760) students from twenty (20) schools turned up the following:

- Almost seventy five percent (75%) of the students used **obscene language or cursed**, with thirty percent (30%) of them saying they did this more than ten (10) times for the term. The comparable figure for **home** was forty percent (40%), and twelve percent (12%) saying that they did this more than ten (10) times for the term.

Teachers in some schools argue that “cursing now is no big thing” and it should no longer be seen as a form of delinquency. Some teachers jokingly refer to cursing as a “second language.” Its use in school seems phenomenal. Many students explained, however, that fighting incidents are usually accompanied by loud cursing.

- Spreading rumours and “bad-talking” other students, perhaps a mild form of delinquency, is also widespread. Forty-five percent (45%) did this, with five percent (5%) doing it more than ten (10) times for the term.

- What about skipping school or classes without good reason? Thirty percent (30%) of the students **skipped school or missed classes**. This amounted to three thousand, one hundred and thirty-two (3,132) times for the term, with four percent (4%) as persistent delinquents – more than ten (10) times for the term.

- Twenty percent (20%) willfully **damaged or vandalized school property** during the term. This amounted to two thousand, one hundred and thirty-nine (2,139) times for the term. The comparable figure for home, damaging **home** furniture, etc., was thirty-eight percent (38%) and three thousand, eight hundred and twenty-four (3,824) times. Five percent (5%) did it more than ten (10) times at school; six percent (6%) more than ten (10) times at home.

- Sixteen percent (16%) of them were actively involved in **gang misbehaviours** in school – a total of one thousand, seven hundred and sixteen

(1,716) times for the term. Three percent (3%) got involved in gang delinquency more than ten (10) times for the term. For “**home-based**” gang delinquency, twelve percent (12%) were involved, with over three percent (3%) being involved more than ten (10) times.

- Ten percent (10%) **stole somebody else’s property**, a total of seven hundred and eighty-two (782) times. For **home**, the comparable figure was twenty percent (20%) and one thousand, six hundred and sixty-four times for the term.
- Fifty-five percent (55%) **did not do homework and got in trouble for it** at school; a total of five thousand, four hundred and forty-five (5,445) times for the thirty-seven (37) day period under study. For **home** it was thirty percent (30%) and two thousand, eight hundred and fifty-seven (2,857) times. The persistent ones, the recidivists, were: seven percent (7%) more than ten (10) times at school, and at home four percent (4%).
- Seven percent (7%) **smoked cigarettes in school**, a total of eight hundred and eighty-two (882) times for the term. The comparable figure for **home** was fifteen percent (15%) and one thousand, nine hundred and thirty-five (1,935) times. The persistent delinquents? Three percent (3%) at school and four percent (4%) at home did it more than ten (10) times.
- Almost twenty percent (20%) said they **drank alcohol in school**, a total of one thousand, five hundred and six times. **At home** it was 50% saying so, and seven thousand, two hundred and ninety (7,290) times – a very big difference. (We also have data for “regular drinkers” and “regular smokers”) For those drinking more than ten (10) times for the term, it was two percent (2%) in school and fifteen percent (15%) at home – quite a big difference again! It seems that the drinking habit is brewed at home
- Over three percent (3%) of the students surveyed said that they **used illegal drugs in school** (for example, cocaine, marijuana) – a total of four hundred and sixty-two (462) times for the term. At **home** it was six percent (6%) and nine hundred and two (902) times. Only one percent (1%) used it at

school more than ten (10) times for the term. At home, the comparable proportion was two percent (2%).

- Twenty-two percent (22%) were **in fights with other students** in school (with no weapon). This amounted to one thousand, eight hundred and ninety-seven (1,897) times in school. For home it was thirty percent (30%) with three thousand, nine hundred and thirteen (3,913) times. At school, over two percent (2%) did it more than ten (10) times; at home over seven percent (7%) did it more than ten (10) times for the term.
- Home-based delinquency includes stealing, vandalism, smoking, drug abuse and drinking alcohol. For using illegal drugs, three percent (3%) of the students did this at school while six percent (6%) twice as many students, did it at home.
- Drinking alcohol also revealed a very big difference. Twenty percent (20%) said they drank alcohol at school while 50% of the two thousand, seven hundred and sixty (2,760) students said they drank alcohol at home with fifteen percent (15%) of them saying more than ten times for the term.
- Smoking was twice as much at home compared to at school (15% vs. 7%). For vandalizing furniture, etc., it was 20% for school and thirty-eight percent (37%) at home – almost twice as many students at home.

While the study was in progress, this Ministry did not sit idly by but addressed the problems as had been identified in earlier reports. Concrete measures to deal with indiscipline were initiated. The Ministry of Education teamed up with the Ministry of National Security to address this issue. The Committee formed a Task Force comprising members from Ministry of Education and National Security. Major initiatives **flowed** from this Task Force:

- (a) The development of a specific mentoring programme with Youth Training Centre (YTC);
- (b) The establishment of a police presence in seventeen (17) selected schools deemed as high risk;
- (c) Procedures for reporting incidents to the police were put in place;
- (d) The introduction of school safety officers;
- (e) The establishment of student councils;
- (f) The training of community leaders to implement parent education;
- (g) The development of a democratic citizenship curriculum.

Madame Speaker, the Ministry of Education, using the research has continued and also put in place a series of far-reaching and sustained initiatives to reduce violence and indiscipline in schools. I wish to divide these into two categories, **Programmes** and **Systems**.

Systems, Madame Speaker, are long lasting and sustainable, designed to be preventive in nature and responsive when necessary. At the level of the school:

- We have established one hundred and two (102) Student Councils in one hundred and two (102) secondary schools out of a total of one hundred and thirty-five (135) secondary schools.
- We have placed one hundred and seventy (170) trained Safety Officers in eighty-five (85) secondary schools and principals are high in praised of this. These officers have replaced the temporary police presence that I spoke about earlier.
- We have built state of the art security fences on all schools that required them. I have not been informed of any external violent elements now entering our secondary schools.
- We have established the Student Support Services Division and fifty-nine (59) secondary schools now have Guidance Officers. For the first time, School Social Workers were introduced into the system and now there are forty-one

(41) of them providing services at approximately ninety (90) primary schools. We also have sixteen (16) Guidance Officers functioning at the primary level.

- We have continued the process of employing Deans and Heads of departments at schools. It is hoped that by 2009 all schools will have a fully functioning Dean system.
- We have joined forces with the Ministry of Health and Social Development. We have recognized the importance of health as it contributes to discipline and have facilitated, with the Ministry of Health, hearing and vision screening. By July 2006, a total of thirty thousand, one hundred and seventeen (30,117) 1st and 2nd year students were screened for hearing difficulties. The overall percentage of the target screened nationally for hearing was 83.3%. Vision screening has commenced in the county of St. Patrick and St. George East.
- As the reports and recommendations indicated, the delivery of the curriculum is a key component in student learning and levels of indiscipline. We have been engaged in continuous in-service training in subject areas such as Maths, English, Technology Education to upgrade the skills of teachers.
- We have recognized that when over two thousand (2,000) students per year with serious literacy problems were placed in secondary schools by the previous government that motivation and learning would be a serious challenge. We have provided remedial teachers to work with them and upgrade their literacy skills and we have set up two Units – STARR and CETT with Master Reading Tutors to tackle reading at both Primary and Secondary Levels.
- We have also established eighty-five (85) Local School Boards to assist with the community effort.
- We now provide a subvention to the National Parent Teacher Association to facilitate the establishment of Parent-Teacher Associations in all our schools.
- We have deshifted fifteen (15) Junior Secondary Schools out of twenty five (25). By September 2007 another four schools would be deshifted bringing the total to 19 out of 25 Junior Secondary Schools.

Madam Speaker while we were strengthening the systems, we were putting various programmes in place to address the problems directly. Our Peace Promotion Unit has spearheaded and co-ordinated these programmes.

- We have introduced a “**Right Choices**” programme working closely in conjunction with several Non-Governmental Organisations. For the academic year 2006-2007, over one hundred and twenty-one (121) workshops were completed in eighty-five (85) schools with twelve thousand (12,000) students benefiting.
- We have introduced Peer Mediation/Counselling and Conflict Resolution for teachers and students. Seventy-five (75) workshops have been completed in thirty-two (32) schools.
- As the reports have suggested that alcohol and drug use is part of the problem we have developed a Drug Abuse and No Smoking Policy for schools and have partnered with Non-Governmental Organisations such as the Secondary Schools Drama Association and Rebirth House to implement activities. Over eleven thousand (11,000) students have benefited both directly and indirectly from these activities in 2006-2007.
- The Student Support Services Division implemented Personal/Social Guidance Programmes focusing on Self-Development, personal and social responsibility and engaged just about sixteen thousand (16,000) students in the September/December Term 2006.
- We have established two (2) Out of School Suspension Centres, one in Victoria and the other in St. George East. The suspended students in Port-of-Spain receive individualized guidance and social work services.
- One hundred and eighty (180) teachers from nine (9) secondary schools were trained in anger and stress management.

Madam Speaker, it is not my intention to boast about our achievements but there have been many and the results are beginning to show. At a survey done with principals as to their understanding and perception of incidents of indiscipline over the period 2002-2005, the results indicate the following:

- In 2002, ten percent (10%) of principals rated Robbery/Theft as very serious in their schools, by 2005; over fifty percent (50) of the principals saw robbery/theft as being minor or not a problem in their schools.
- In 2002 just about thirty percent (30) of principals surveyed indicated that absenteeism/Class cutting was serious and over by 2005 over fifty percent (50%) were rating this as a minor problem in their schools.
- In 2003, just about sixty percent (60%) rated physical conflicts as being moderate and by 2005 that had been reduced to about forty percent (40). In this area we have a lot more work to do.
- In 2002, just about forty percent (40%) of principals rated the possession of weapons a serious to moderate problem. In 2005, fifty percent (50%) were saying that possession of weapons had become a minor problem.
- In 2002 eighty percent (80%) of principals considered the use of drugs to be a minor problem, in 2005 however just about seventy-five percent (75%) indicated drugs to be a minor problem. This is another area that may require additional work.

Madam Speaker, my Ministry is indeed very active in the reduction of violence and indiscipline. It is not a piece meal approach, but as you can see a holistic approach that involves Curriculum, Student Support, Peace Promotion, other Ministries and Non-Governmental Organisations.

The school is a microcosm of the society and violence and indiscipline is part and parcel of school life. My Ministry is relentless in its efforts to reduce such to very manageable levels.

I am appealing to Parents and adults to understand that we have programmes to reduce indiscipline and that they must not enter our schools to disrupt the peace and calm. Heed our call for peace and safety and security in the school environment. We can only achieve this with your support.

We recognize the need to engage the community in this effort and therefore, we have begun working with the Ministry of Social Development, the Ministry of Community Development and Gender Affairs as they strengthen their Family Policy and Programmes in an appeal to parents to come on board – to understand the problems affecting their children and to hold hands with us to achieve a more caring and peaceful society.

I thank you.

