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EIGHTH NATIONAL ASSEMBLY PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

TUESDAY 18 MARCH 2025

ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

PRIMARY & SECONDARY SCHOOLS - BULLYING, DRUG POSSESSION & CONSUMPTION – REPORTED CASES

The Leader of the Opposition (Mr G. Lesjongard) (by Private Notice) asked the Minister of Education and Human Resource whether, in regard to bullying, drug possession and consumption amongst students in public and private primary and secondary schools, he will state the number of reported cases thereof, since January 2025 to date, indicating the measures taken by his Ministry for the control and eradication thereof.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Minister!

Dr. Gungapersad: Madam Speaker, I wish to thank the hon. Member for putting this question on harassment, bullying and substance abuse in educational institutions.

Let me remind the hon. Leader of the Opposition, the public at large and everyone that the issue of bullying, drug possession and consumption among students in public and private primary and secondary schools does not date back to a few months ago. I hope the hon. Leader of the Opposition, being a Cabinet member of the previous government, must have, on several occasions, asked the previous Minister of Education about same, and I hope he got the right answers from her.

Bullying has always been a major problem in all our schools. We are not like them; going to hide the truth, to hide the problem. It was, and it is, a problem.

If you allow me, Madam Speaker, as a former Rector myself, I can vouch that even at that time, there were cases, but cases escalated enormously during the past 10 years. I can see in front of me a former Deputy Rector, hon. Jhummun, hon. Mrs Henriette-Manan from Rodrigues, an Educator; on my left, I have hon. Reza Saumtally, hon. Ramkalawon – members of the fraternity.

For the past 10 years, managing discipline, especially drugs and harassment, was a real headache because there was no willpower. There was no political willpower, but, now, changement is here. We have a clear mandate by the population to set things right.

The hon. Leader of the Opposition, in a recent press conference, was talking about popilasion pe bizin manz margoz. Who planted the margoz? They planted the margoz, and today, when we are reaping the margoz, he finds it bitter. The same question, this drug issue, under their tenure, has escalated to such a proportion. Perhaps, *bénéfice du doute*, he is coming to do his *mea culpa*. We grant him this so that he goes home and feels that he has now started doing the right thing. Had he been doing it for the past 10 years, we would not have reached here.

When we, former Members of the Opposition – the MMM, the Labour Party and Members of Nouveaux Démocrates – were fighting this scourge, what did we find?

Fortunately, you are in the Chair, Madam Speaker. We had another person in the Chair, and that person would prevent us. When hon. Reza Uteem was putting questions on how many drug lords were arrested; when we were putting questions; when I was putting questions, we were prevented from talking! Today, *la parole est libre; la pensée est libre; le pays est libre*. Et maintenant, dans cette situation de liberté, on va commencer à adresser ce problème qui nous concerne tous comme une nation, comme un pays.

I remember – again, I will say it – as a Rector of a secondary school, the problem had not attained the level that it has attained today. Today, we have inherited that from them. I have noticed that in the last 10 years, when I became an MP and was not part of the formal education system, there was an abrupt recurrence of bullying as well as consumption of illicit drugs or substances in our schools. Pathetic! We feel sad about the situation. We are not happy about that situation because we are talking about our kids, the kids of the Republic.

Those parents whose kids have become victims of that situation may vouch for what we are talking about today. How can I forget that all my questions relating to this crucial matter were shut down by the previous Speaker; loudspeaker?

Sorry, Madam Speaker, for calling... Goalkeeping skills led to this alarming situation. Not only him! The previous government did not want to really look at that problem! Zot finn fane, nou pou netwaye ! Zot finn fane, nou pou netwaye!

And the problem they have brought to our threshold, we are committed with this hon. Prime Minister, the hon. Deputy Prime Minister, and everyone present here in this august Assembly; we have the mandate, and we have the conviction that together, we are going to do our maximum to address these issues.

For the past 10 years, unfortunately, some students have interiorised this bad habit of bullying and school violence. They believed that they could do whatever they wish, just like a certain Franklin, Dewdanee, and others of this country. These had become, unfortunately, the role models for some. Unfortunately! I hope now the country and the students are going to have other role models so that they can emulate better role models than they had in the past.

This has led to a lot of frustration among youngsters. It is sad to note that bullies are coming from a younger and younger age bracket, Madam Speaker. It is sad. In the past, bullies were of a certain age. Today, we have bullies even in primary and pre-primary schools! It is dangerous for a country. Did they address that issue?

Another thing that I am highlighting is that we have bullies même au sein de la famille ; harcèlement, même au sein de la famille. Pour commencer, il faudra changer la mentalité au sein même de la famille, ensuite à l'école, et ensuite dans la société. Il faudra adresser ce problème épineux un peu partout.

Madam Speaker, today, we have the strong political will to announce that our Prime Minister means business on this front, and there will be no piecemeal approach as they were doing, as his former government was doing. As Minister of Education, I cannot do it alone, and neither can the officials from the Ministry of Education do it alone. We need the full support of the population which gave us a clear mandate in the last General Elections. The message is clear: with us, no dilly-dallying.

Madam Speaker: Keep an eye on the time, please!

Dr. Gungapersad: With us, no dilly-dallying! The MSM government had the je-m'enfoutisme attitude. The MSM government catered for only one thing: money politics. And drug was the primary thing which entered our society.

That is why some of us had nicknamed MSM 'Mouvman Soutir Mafia'! 'Mouvman Soutir Mafia' has led us to this situation today! Many were soutire. Now we are uprooting the evil which has set its tentacles in our society. For all of us present here, it has become our arduous task. But we are hopeful. For the sake of the kids of this country, we will stand united as a nation in order to fight these scourges.

They pretended! They pretended to do what? Kass le reins mafia! But, at the end of the day, they ended up caresser les reins mafia! And this problem gradually moved from the society and entered the premises of schools. How unfortunate! They had the time, they had the opportunity, they had the mandate to protect schools! They did not! They did not do it!

Today, the Leader of the Opposition is coming and asking this question. It amounts to intellectual dishonesty! But the population outside...

Madam Speaker: Hon. Minister, may I?

Dr. Gungapersad: Yes!

Madam Speaker: You will have, at one point, to tell us what you are going to do about it.

Dr. Gungapersad: I will! It is coming in piecemeal, I know. But the Leader of the Opposition will have to wait for that because the country waited for 10 years in order to bring the right recipe to solve this problem! Because our lakwizinn is not like their lakwizinn.

Madam Speaker, I am coming to the answer.

Madam Speaker: Yes!

Dr. Gungapersad: This year, for the past two months, since the resumption of schools in January 2025, I am informed that across the four educational zones, we have –

1. 59 cases of harassment and bullying, involving pupils of Government Primary Schools.
2. 67 cases involving students of State Secondary Schools.
3. 21 cases involving students of Private Secondary Schools out of 108 PrivateSecondary Schools.

In the past, I have shown concern on this issue of substance abuse, whether inside or outside of Parliament. This august Assembly will recall PQ B/476, which was related to substance abuse, as well as PQ B/795.

Now, let me enumerate the measures that my Ministry has taken in order to address this serious problem of bullying, drug abuse and so on. Bear with me, hon. Leader of the Opposition, I am going to enumerate them now, which is the second part of the PNQ.

Madam Speaker, we have undertaken the following actions; there will be 14 of them.

Madam Speaker: Address me!

Dr. Gungapersad: Yes. There are 14 of them.

(i) We are going to set up an Education Counsel comprising representatives of a wide-cross section of all education sectors to address the issue in a holistic manner and for alignment of actions developing consensus on a wide range of issues.

(ii) Institutional networking and collaborative partnership with several stakeholders such as the Police Force, CDU, Brigade pour la Protection de la Famille.

(iii) Reinforcement of the Student Care and Counselling Desk in State Secondary Schools to provide necessary support to students facing emotional and other psychological problems with a view to promoting positive behaviour through listening and supporting students and the training of Educators involved in providing these services.

(iv) Placing a strong focus on value-based education and life skills in the school curriculum.

(v) Reviving the intercollege competitions in collaboration with the Ministry of Youth and Sports, with the support of hon. Nagalingum, thereby giving them a sense of purpose. This is what both Ministries are going to do.

(vi) Helping pupils better manage their emotions through the implementation of the Social and Emotional Well-being Programme.

(vii) Strengthening the National Education and Counselling Service through the recruitment of additional Educational Psychologists and Educational Social Workers at the level of the Ministry and Private Secondary Education Authority.

(viii) Carrying out sensitisation of students by the National Education and Counselling Service.

(ix) Setting up of pastoral care committees to support students with behavioural issues.

(x) Ensure that disciplinary committees look into actions to be taken against students involved in cases of indiscipline and violence.

(xi) Ensuring the installation of CCTV cameras in some secondary schools.

(xii) Posting of daytime security guards in risk-prone schools.

(xiii) Provision of a gatekeeper to control access to school compounds during the day.

(xiv) Regular Police patrolling and vigilance around the risk-prone schools and at bus terminals.

Madam Speaker, this question is not a simple PNQ. It concerns our kids; it concerns the future of this country; it concerns our children. That is why we are serious about it. Madam Speaker, I would like to inform the House that this Government means business and will leave no stone unturned to tackle school violence, bullying and substance abuse through the support of all stakeholders.

Since I took office, Madam Speaker, in December 2024, I had several meetings with different sections of my Ministry, and we jointly analysed the situation in our schools. It was noted, with concern, that very little was done to mitigate the problem of drugs in our schools. One drug use prevention education programme, namely the Get Connected programme, is being run for Grade 8 students only. A programme being run only for one specific grade, Grade 8, whereas this problem concerns everyone. We are going to look into this issue.

Despite the extensive help being provided by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime to run the above programme, the previous regime, through its recklessness, failed to kickstart same in schools.

Madam Speaker, drug and substance abuse in schools is not a problem for Grade 8 or Grade 10 only; it is a problem from pre-primary to tertiary level. This matter has also been highlighted by the National Audit Office in January 2025.

Madam Speaker, I wish to highlight that all aspects related to indiscipline in schools will be further discussed in consultation with all stakeholders during the forthcoming ...

Madam Speaker: One more minute ...

Dr. Gungapersad: ... Assises de l'Éducation...

Madam Speaker: One more minute so that he...

Dr. Gungapersad: ... which my Ministry will host in mid-April 2025.

Thank you.

Madam Speaker: Thank you very much. Supplementary questions!

Mr Lesjongard: Madam Speaker, this has been a very long reply from the Minister. I hope I will get enough time to put my supplementary questions.

Madam Speaker: You put your question! Put your question!

Mr Lesjongard: My first question is with regard to protocol. Can the hon. Minister inform the House whether there is a protocol applicable to all educational institutions, that is, public and private, with regard to drug possession and drug consumption?

Madam Speaker: Yes. Straightforward, please!

Dr. Gungapersad: Madam Speaker, yes, there is. But, as someone coming from that fraternity, I wish to inform the hon. Leader of Opposition on the number of problems and hurdles that Rectors and Educators face in order to search the bags of students. Sometimes, when they have suspicion that some students may be in the possession of illicit substances, it is not easy for them to do that. That is why, in the weeks to come, I would solicit the help of the Attorney General's Office in order to see what can be done in order to empower our Rectors, Deputy Rectors, teaching and non-teaching staff in order to ally them in this combat against substance abuse in our schools.

Madam Speaker: Thank you. Yes!

Mr Lesjongard: I understand that now we do not have one protocol for all the institutions of the country. Now we are going to look into the possibility of having one protocol for all those institutions. Can the hon. Minister inform the House of the various types of drugs seized in our educational institutions and whether there is a follow-up from his Ministry on cases of drug possession by the students?

Madam Speaker: That is a very tall order, hon. Leader of the Opposition!

Mr Lesjongard: Yes, Madam. This is a very important subject.

Madam Speaker: I don't see how he can wind up in such a short time! And there is ...

Mr Lesjongard: But he was given all the time, Madam Speaker. This is very unfair!

(Interruptions)

Madam Speaker: Straightforward! Straightforward!

Dr. Gungapersad: Like the many fallacies spread by the previous government, the Leader of the Opposition, again, is coming with a fallacy that there is no common protocol in the schools in order to detect drugs. He is wrong; we have a common protocol which applies in all schools, for his information.

Now, he has asked for the type of drugs. Unfortunately, we are talking about cannabis; we are talking about synthetic drugs, heroin, and cocaine. He must have known it on his own.

Madam Speaker: No comments! No comments! One moment! Yes! Your friend is asking for ...

Mr Lesjongard: Yes.

Madam Speaker: I give you one and then we will wind up.

Mr Lesjongard: You cannot do that, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: No, we can't ...

Mr Lesjongard: This is such an important subject on a PNQ ...

Madam Speaker: I know.

Mr Lesjongard: I have only three questions?

Madam Speaker: Of course...

Mr Lesjongard: This is the first time, Madam Speaker!

(Interruptions)

It is such an important subject!

Mr A. Duval: Démocratie!

Madam Speaker: I have 30 minutes for PNQ. We can come back on the subject. Don't you think I am interested in this subject?

Mr Lesjongard: If you have given him so much time for his reply...

Madam Speaker: I have tried to stop him.

Mr Lesjongard: ... at least give us time to put questions...

Madam Speaker: You are wasting time!

Mr Lesjongard: ...Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Right now, you are wasting time!

Mr Lesjongard: No, this is very unfair!

Mr A. Duval: At the eleventh hour.

Madam Speaker: Go ahead! Go ahead!

Mr Lesjongard: Non!

If I have heard well what he has said, will the hon. Minister consider conducting random searches in educational institutions with the collaboration of the Police Force as this will deter drug peddlers to operate in the vicinity or within the premises of educational institutions?

Madam Speaker: Short and quick!

An hon. Member: Inn pran twa 10 an ...

Dr. Gungapersad: Yes, that is what we are saying. It took him 10 years to come up with that enlightening and wise decision!

(Interruptions)

Madam Speaker: No comment! No comment!

Dr. Gungapersad: I have answered it.

Madam Speaker: No comments!

Mr A. Duval, hon. Member!

Mr A. Duval: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, the last available report of the National Drug Observatory Report states that there is an increased consumption under 18, including under 14 years old. Now, given that this increase concerns schools mainly, and, in fact, in view of the promise to set up a Select Committee on drugs to come up with a master plan, a promise to do so one week after the elections; we are now in the 16th week.

Madam Speaker: Question!

Mr A. Duval: Can the Minister, therefore, tell us whether this has been relegated on the agenda?

Dr. Gungapersad: It has never and will never be relegated. For his information, let me inform him and the House, unfortunately, Madam Speaker, ...

Madam Speaker: You call him hon. Member!

Dr. Gungapersad: Hon. Member.

Unfortunately, Madam Speaker, I cannot compare or even carry out a status of the different categories of indiscipline in different schools. Why? The answer comes from the National Audit Office. The National Audit Office says: The previous government failed to collect and analyse data for the various types of indiscipline on a regular basis.

I am not saying this!

(Interruptions)

I am not saying this!

Had there been proper organisational collection of data, various data-driven measures could have been initiated, and we would not be where we are today. But we are going to redress that situation.

Madam Speaker: Okay! Another question?

Mr Lesjongard: Yes, I have, not only one, but more.

Madam Speaker, can the hon. Minister inform the House whether teachers in our primary and secondary institutions, during and after school hours, hold classes with the students on moral values such as respect, honesty, responsibility, empathy, compassion, and integrity, which foster positive relationships and ethical behaviours?

Madam Speaker: Straightforward answer!

Mr Lesjongard: Yes. I want straightforward answers.

Dr. Gungapersad: Yes!

Madam Speaker: My motto, in fact! My motto!

Dr. Gungapersad: Had the former Speaker of the Assembly followed that class, it would have been much better. Yes, I assure the hon. Leader of the Opposition that these classes are conducted in our different schools, be it private or State Secondary Schools.

Madam Speaker: Thank you.

Mr A. Duval: Address the Speaker!

Madam Speaker: You are not the Speaker today!

Mr A. Duval: He is passing comments on me.

Madam Speaker: Let me... Let me...

Mr A. Duval: He should apply the rules.

Madam Speaker: Hon. A. Duval, let me put order in the House!

Mr Lesjongard: May I, Madam Speaker?

Madam Speaker: Yes.

Mr Lesjongard: In view of the prevailing situation in our educational institutions concerning discipline, bullying, and drug abuse, will the hon. Minister consider having a Standing Committee comprising the various stakeholders and meeting at regular intervals? I am talking of a Standing Committee.

Dr. Gungapersad: Madam Speaker, I think he is not following what is happening in this country. He is not following because on Monday, I have already started with Zone 1; next Monday, we are meeting Zone 2 and Zone 3. We have already met almost all stakeholders in December. So, for his information, he should come with the right information when talking about that.

Madam Speaker: Maybe I can suggest, since this is such an important issue and it concerns all our children, whatever be our political opinions, our community, why don't you come with a Statement with all the information? Please, hon. Minister.

Dr. Gungapersad: Thank you, Madam Speaker. This is a good suggestion, and I am inviting the hon. Leader of the Opposition pour les Assises de l'Éducation which will take place on 15, 16 and 17 April.

Madam Speaker: Okay. Invitation.

Mr Lesjongard: Madam Speaker, when I mentioned a Standing Committee with all stakeholders, I made reference to Parent Teacher Association (PTA) and students also. Will that Committee include members of Parent Teacher Association and students also?

Dr. Gungapersad: Madam Speaker, yes. The answer is yes.

Madam Speaker: Yes!

Mr Lesjongard: Last question, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Yes.

Mr Lesjongard: With regard to the current legislation in force, will the hon. Minister consider reviewing same to toughen the law so as to deter such practices and make our educational institutions safer, be it for students or for teachers, Madam Speaker?

Dr. Gungapersad: Madam Speaker, yes. The answer is yes.

Madam Speaker: Thank you. Okay, thank you very much.