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ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

PRIVATE PRE-PRIMARY SCHOOLS – REVISED GRANT-IN-AID SCHEME – IMPACT ASSESSMENT

(No. B/1171) Mr C. Baboolall (First Member for Montagne Blanche & GRSE) asked the Minister of Education and Human Resource whether, in regard to the implementation of the revised Grant-in-Aid Scheme for private pre-primary schools with effect from 1 January 2027, including the reduction of the operational cost reimbursement to 50 percent, the capping of the rent reimbursement at Rs 5,000 and the withdrawal of the Rs 400 per-student subsidy from the 106 fee-charging private pre-primary schools, he will state –

(a) the reasons therefor, and

(b) whether an assessment of the estimated impact thereof on low-income households was carried out prior thereto and, if so, indicate the findings thereof.

Dr. Gungapersad*:* Madam Speaker, the current Grant-in-Aid (GIA) Scheme for Private Pre-Primary Schools was approved in 2023 and became operational on 01 January 2024. At present, 417 private pre-primary schools benefit from the Scheme at an annual amount of approximately Rs825 million. In addition, 106 private pre-primary schools which did not opt to join the GIA Scheme currently receive a monthly per capita grant of Rs400 per child, representing an amount of Rs26 million annually. These schools are authorised to charge tuition fees from parents. Following the announcement made in the Budget Speech 2025-2026 regarding a review of the Scheme, Government established an Interministerial Committee to undertake a comprehensive assessment of the existing arrangements and to make appropriate recommendations aimed at ensuring the Scheme's long-term financial sustainability while preserving access to quality early childhood education.

Madam Speaker, in carrying out its mandate, the Interministerial Committee examined the existing Scheme and considered representations received from private pre-primary school operators, the *Confédération des Travailleurs des Secteurs Public et Privé* (CTSP), and other relevant stakeholders. Following its deliberations, Government approved the committee's recommendations, namely –

a. the continued payment of salaries of employees of schools operating under the GIA Scheme;

b. the introduction of a revised staffing model whereby schools with an enrolment of up to 20 pupils will operate under a teacher-manager model, replacing the existing manager post. The incumbent will receive the salary applicable to a teacher together with a monthly managerial allowance of Rs5,000;

c. the phased upgrading of qualifications of existing managers;

d. the gradual phasing out of the grades of assistant teacher and assistant manager;

e. the phased adoption of a teacher-pupil ratio of 1 to 20 in lieu of the current ratio of 1 to 15;

f. reimbursement of a monthly rental expenses up to maximum of Rs5,000 for the 33 schools with an enrolment of up to 20 pupils;

g. the discontinuation of rental reimbursement for the 117 schools with an enrolment exceeding 20 pupils;

h. a 50% reduction in the reimbursement of operational expenses, and

i. the strengthening of governance, accountability and monitoring mechanisms to ensure the transparent and efficient utilisation of public funds.

In addition, the monthly per capita grant of Rs400 currently payable to the 106 feecharging private pre-primary schools outside the GIA Scheme will be discontinued. These measures were formulated after careful consideration of a long-term financial sustainability of the Scheme, prevailing economic conditions and the need to safeguard public resources and the objective of preserving employment within the private pre-primary education sector.

Madam Speaker, the reimbursement of operational expenses has been reviewed following inspections conducted by officers of the Early Childhood Care and Education Authority, which revealed instances where certain items claimed under operational expenditure, including furniture and equipment, which were either not utilised for educational purposes or were not being used in accordance with the objectives of the Scheme. Similarly, rental reimbursement has been capped at Rs5,000 per month for the 33 schools with an enrolment of up to 20 pupils.

I wish to inform the House that disparity in the rental. There are some schools which have only 13 pupils, which have a monthly rental of Rs35,000, Rs38,000, Rs16,000, whereas other schools which manage with Rs1,000, Rs2,000, etc. Government considers that the grant represents only a limited contribution towards the fees paid by parents. Its discontinuation will enable available public resources to be redirected towards strengthening the support to the GIA Scheme.

Madam Speaker, as regards part (b) of the hon. Member's question, I wish to inform the House that the Interministerial Committee did assess the likely impact of the revised Scheme, including its implications for low-income households. The assessment concluded that parents will continue to have access to free pre-primary education by enrolling their children either in the public pre-primary schools or in private pre-primary schools operating under the revised GIA Scheme. It is pertinent to note that public pre-primary schools currently operate with approximately 50% unused capacity, thereby providing sufficient places to accommodate any increase in enrolment.

Allow me to inform the House that there are currently 4,467 vacancies in our public pre-primary schools which can cater up to 7,735 pupils, and we have 790 vacancies in our pre-primary schools operated by local authorities which can cater up to 1,460 pupils. Let me reassure the hon. Member that our children coming from low-income households remain our main concern. For example, 357 children are registered under SRM Scheme and benefit from the facilities they are entitled to. Besides this, currently all our children attending pre-primary schools in the 26 ZEP schools in the four zones are eligible for free meals. I wish to inform the House that in the same line of thought, my Ministry is currently examining the feasibility of introducing, on a pilot basis, a programme for the provision of free breakfast and free lunch to children attending public pre-primary schools situated in socially and economically disadvantaged areas.

In parallel, my Ministry will engage with the local authorities responsible for 39 public pre-primary schools under their jurisdiction with the view of encouraging them to consider the implementation of similar initiatives. The revised grant-in-aid Scheme therefore seeks to ensure the prudent, transparent and sustainable use of public funds while safeguarding equitable access to education in the pre-primary sector. It will also enable the Early Childhood Care and Education Authority to focus more effectively on its statutory responsibilities of regulating, monitoring and enforcing compliance within the early childhood education sector.

***Madam Speaker*:** Yes, hon. Member?

***Mr Baboolall*:** I thank the hon. Minister for his answer. Can the hon. Minister confirm the total number of children currently enrolled across those 106 fee-charging private schools, losing the 400 per student subsidy and what proportion of their families are estimated to fall within lower income threshold?

***Dr. Gungapersad*:** Now, as I have already mentioned, especially low-income group children, they are already looked after by the SRM Scheme. And the next batch of children who go to ZEP primary schools, there when we have the Pre-Primary Unit (PPU), the children going in those schools are also looked after, and are provided free meals like the primary school students. We care for them.

***Madam Speaker*:** Yes, second question!

***Mr Baboolall*:** My question was straight forward. How many children are concerned?

***Madam Speaker*:** Do you have figures?

Dr. Gungapersad: I will have to check the number, but I gave you for SRM. I gave you the number earlier in my answer.

Mr Baboolall: I asked for the 106 fee charging private schools.

Dr. Gungapersad: For 106, I can give you the figure. It is 5,942.