

PRIMARY SCHOOL - CHILDREN - COMPULSORY ATTENDANCE

(No. B/149) Mr M. Chumroo (First Member for Port Louis North & Montagne Longue) asked the Minister of Education & Scientific Research whether he will state what measures he is contemplating to ensure that all children of age for primary education and not attending school now will do so next year.

Mr Obeegadoo: Sir, Section 37 of the Education Act 1957 provides that:-

- (i) "Every child who has attained such age as may be described for admission to a primary school shall attend a primary school"; and
- (ii) "Where the responsible party of a child referred to in sub section (i) without reasonable cause, refuses or neglects to cause the child to attend primary school regularly, he shall commit an offence and shall, on conviction, be liable to a fine not exceeding Rs3,000 and to a term of imprisonment not exceeding two years."

According to statistics, more than 98% of children having reached the age of five which is the age to attend primary school are admitted to a primary school. The remaining of those who do not join school for various reasons such as health problems, broken families or where the children concerned have been abandoned.

I am given to understand that in the course of its normal activities, my Ministry encourages parents to shoulder their responsibility of sending their children to school.

I am further informed that the Ministry of Women's Rights, Child Development and Family Welfare which has the responsibility for child welfare also cooperates in dealing with this problem. In the course of their work, should its officers come across cases of school age children not attending school, the cases are reported either to my Ministry or directly to a school.

However, I must admit that there are some disturbing cases. Only yesterday my attention was drawn to the case of a shelter which houses some 26 children of school going age, none of which attends school. Accordingly, I am taking immediate measures to reinforce action on the ground by my Ministry in coordination with the Ministry of Women's Rights, Child Development and Family Welfare and the Ministry of Social Security to ensure that all children of the appropriate age do attend school. In addition, I intend to see to it that the legal proceedings are henceforth instituted as against responsible parties who

do not, without reasonable cause, assume their duty of ensuring that their children attend school. I remain, of course, open to any specific suggestions the hon. gentleman may have.

Mr Chumroo: Sir, I would like to know if the Ministry has the figures regarding children who do not attend school?

Mr Obeegadoo: The figures available have been communicated by the Ministry of Women's Rights and relate to the calendar year 1999. According to cases uncovered by that Ministry there were 78 children not attending school, 51 children who had gone undeclared, 12 children involved in mendicity and 6 children involved in child labour. I am going beyond the information requested. So, as regards children not attending school during the year 1999, from information made available by the Ministry of Women's Rights the number was 78. As soon as these are reported, the Ministry of Education is informed to arrange for admission of the children to school.

Mr Chumroo: Sir, being given that the root cause of all juvenile delinquency is children not attending school, I believe that the Ministry of Education should take firm steps to remedy the situation.

Mr Obeegadoo: I could not agree more, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir. That is why I said that we are now going to take new initiatives in conjunction not only with the Ministry of Women's Rights but also the Ministry of Social Security; and we shall not hesitate to prosecute those parents who do not assume what is their duty under the law.

Mr Dowarkasing: Sir, the hon. Minister spoke about the 98% of attendance. I mean this percentage is persisting for the last seven years. What I mean to say is that 2% for the last seven years is not attending school. Nothing has been done so far. We are not the first country. Zimbabwe is having a 100% attendance in primary schools. I think we can reach that target if appropriate measures are taken.

Mr Obeegadoo: As the hon. gentleman is aware I was not Minister of Education for the past two years. I am now assuring the House that all required measures will be taken to ensure that a higher percentage of our children do attend school. I know that the hon. Member who has put the supplementary question has some experience in the field; we shall be very interested to receive any suggestions he may have pertaining to this matter.

15.05.01

(2)

CHILDREN BETWEEN 5 AND 12 - COMPULSORY PRIMARY EDUCATION

(No. B/387) Mrs F. Labelle (Second Member for Beau Bassin & Petite Rivière) asked the Minister of Education & Scientific Research whether he will state if there exists any mechanism to ensure that children aged between 5 and 12 attend primary school.

Mr Obeegadoo: Sir, paragraph 37 of the Education Act was amended in May 1991 to make primary education compulsory. However, there does not at present exist any mechanism to ensure that all children having attained the age of 5 attend school.

As the hon. Member is aware, my Ministry carries out an annual exercise for admission to Standard I and wide publicity through Radio/TV and the newspapers is given to it so as to reach as far as possible all parents.

There are, however, cases of children of primary school-going age who do not attend primary school due to non-declaration or tardy declaration of birth. It is difficult to trace such cases out in the absence of any official document from the Civil Status Office.

72

UNREVISED

KV/9/P14/2

NO B/387 (CONTD)

In the past also, the case of children in a *centre de refuge* (a shelter) not attending school for want of a permanent address was brought to my attention and was immediately attended to.

There are also, unfortunately, cases of parents who, by ignorance or lack of economic means or worse, negligence, do not send their children to school.

My Ministry has since last year approached the Ministry of Women Rights, Child Development and Family Welfare and we hope to rapidly evolve a proper mechanism to detect such cases and adopt remedial measures with additional inputs from the Ministry of Social Security.

Mrs Labelle: Mr Speaker, Sir, I am not talking about kids who have never been admitted to school only. Unfortunately, we do have dropouts from Standard II or III. Those kids have been admitted to school and, after some time, they have dropped out. These particular cases are, I believe, not that

difficult to trace out. Will the Minister contemplate liaising with the teachers and so on in order to see whether something can be done concerning these particular cases of dropout from primary school?

Mr Obeegadoo: Absolutely, Mr Speaker. I think this has been a long neglected area. There are cases, as the one mentioned by the hon. Member, which we should be able to trace out, but there are many other cases that are more difficult to trace out because the children have never, in the first place, been admitted to school. That is where we are looking at various possibilities, and there is no single obvious way to trace out those cases. In fact, I remember, last year, hon. Chumroo, if I am not mistaken, raised the very same issue and pointed to the fact that, according to official statistics, we have 98% of school attendance, and asked why should it not be 100%. I welcome the idea that has just been mooted and would welcome any other ideas that would help us find the appropriate mechanism.

Mr Dowarkasing: Three or four years ago, from a census carried out by the UNICEF, we were informed that only 2% of our schoolchildren who were supposed to be in schools were not there. Has this percentage increased or decreased?

(Contd)

73

UNREVISED

KV/9/p14/3

NO B/387 (CONTD)

Mr Obeegadoo: According to the latest statistics in our possession, it is slightly more than 98% of our children of primary school going age who do attend school. So, there does not seem to have been any significant change there, and it is a matter which, I agree, must be attended to.

Mr Barbier: The Minister has given us the figure country-wise. May I ask the Minister whether he can give us any figure region-wise?

Mr Obeegadoo: I am afraid that the only figures we do have are those that have been communicated to us by the Ministry of Women's Rights, that is, reported cases of children not attending school. If the hon. gentleman so decides, we can ask for a breakdown and circulate the information.

Mrs Labelle: Mr Speaker, Sir, we are talking about a figure of 2%, but I

think that everyone is aware that the number of street kids is increasing. I am talking of kids between the age of 5 and 12. I, therefore, have doubts about the figure of 2%.

Mr Obegadoo: All that I can say is that I am aware that the Ministry of Social Security is taking very specific initiatives concerning street children, and we shall liaise with my colleague, hon. Lauthan, to ensure that we do what needs to be done.

YEAR 2005

PRIMARY & SECONDARY LEVELS – COMPULSORY EDUCATION (30/08/05)

(No. I B/161) Mrs S. Hanoomanjee (Second Member for Savanne and Black River) asked the Minister of Education and Human Resources whether he will state what measures have been taken to ensure that compulsory education both at primary and secondary levels is being complied with.

Mr Gokhool: Mr Speaker, Sir, it should be recalled that compulsory primary education was introduced in 1991 whereas compulsory secondary education does not yet exist. In fact, compulsory education up to the age of 16 was introduced this year, following legislation passed by the previous Government in November last year. My predecessor had, in his speech, for the second reading of the Bill, last year, underlined that this year would be a transitional year. I must point out that the legislation for compulsory education up to the age of 16 has been passed somehow hastily without a proper mechanism for the enforcement of the legislation and for the monitoring of attendance in order to identify those who do not register to attend school or who subsequently dropout of the system.

I am informed that, for the primary school sector, the enrolment rate is in the region of 98% to 99% and, in spite of the individual efforts of my Ministry, the Ministry of Women's Rights, Child's Development, Family Welfare and Consumer Protection, the Ministry of Social Security, National Solidarity and Senior Citizens Welfare and Reform Institutions and Non Governmental Organisations, it is very difficult to attain the 100% enrolment figure.

As regards the secondary schools sector, where enrolment rate prior to 2005 was 71%, there is no indication, at this stage, that the introduction of compulsory secondary education up to the age of 16 has contributed to an improvement thereof.

To ensure compulsory education at primary level, and up to the age of 16 at secondary level, one has to target the following categories of students –

- (i) those who do not attend primary school at all;
- (ii) those who drop out from primary schools between Standards I and VI;
- (iii) those who do not enroll in either in Form I mainstream or Form I prevocational at secondary level, and

(iv) those who drop out from the secondary school before reaching the age of 16.

There is definitely need to set up a monitoring mechanism to ensure compulsory education up to the age of 16 and to combat both nonregistration and school drop-outs at primary and secondary levels. My Ministry, in collaboration with other stakeholders, would be working in that direction within the broader objective of moving towards a world-class quality education, as already pointed out in the Government Programme 2005-2010. In this respect, one of the measures, which will no doubt contribute in the process, is the provision of free transport to students.