

## PNQ ON EDUCATION

3

CA/D07/P01/1

Debate No. 07 of 8.05.01

### ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

#### PRIMARY SECTOR - REFORMS

**The Leader of the Opposition (Dr. N. Ramgoolam)** (*By Private Notice*) asked the Minister of Education & Scientific Research whether, in regard to the proposed reforms at primary level, he will state –

- (a) the precise mechanism whereby the grading system will replace the present ranking system at the CPE examinations;
- (b) how will the proposed system be used for admission purposes in Form I in January 2003;
- (c) how will competency in Asian/Arabic languages be used for admission purposes; and
- (d) whether he will maintain the proposed extension of school hours and, if so, will he envisage any salary increase for teachers upon the introduction of the new curriculum.

**Mr Obeegadoo:** Mr Speaker, Sir, allow me to begin by thanking the hon. Leader of the Opposition for the interest shown in the work of the Ministry of Education & Scientific Research.

The House will recall that the Presidential Address of 3 October 2000, at paragraphs 129, 130 and 131, reads as follows:-

“129. An 11-year system of compulsory education will be established consisting of 6 years of basic schooling of primary level followed by 5 years of broad based secondary schooling to provide all students with the necessary skills and aptitudes. A technical studies stream will be made available for all interested students at secondary level.

130. A new curriculum for primary schooling will be introduced leading to an examination at the end of the primary cycle. CPE ranking will be replaced by an objective and equitable Grade System for the inclusion of oriental languages without prejudicing any children. Admission to secondary schools will be regionalised according to a formula guaranteeing a fair measure of parental choice and affording due recognition to the specificities of confessional secondary schools.

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CA/D07/P01/2  
PNQ (Contd)

131. Government will embark on an accelerated programme of construction of high standard secondary schools and form VI colleges regionwise. The whole approach to maintenance will be reviewed and infrastructural improvements carried out in existing education institutions”.

Having regard to parts (a), (b) & (c) of the question which relate to the proposed CPE grading mechanism, admission formula for Form I and inclusion of Asian/Arabic languages, the Ministry of Education & Scientific Research has strictly adhered to the philosophy and measures announced in the extracts of the Presidential Address just quoted.

At its last meeting on Friday 04 May 2001, Cabinet approved the broad proposals of the Ministry of Education & Scientific Research for abolition of CPE ranking and regionalisation of admission to secondary schools. My Ministry is now working on the specific measures and detailed modalities, including a precise time frame to translate into practice, as early as possible, the reform project. In the circumstances, the hon. Leader of the Opposition will appreciate that to venture tentative and incomplete answers to the very specific and sensitive matters raised in parts (a), (b) & (c) of the question would be premature and could lead to considerable confusion.

However, I propose to meet all the stakeholders of the primary and secondary educational sectors very shortly, to present to them the whole reform project. I propose to make a comprehensive statement on the whole issue at the first sitting of the National Assembly thereafter, and I shall arrange for copies of the document explaining the reform measures to be forwarded to all Members of the National Assembly. Furthermore, a full information cum discussion meeting for Members of the House will, with your permission, Mr Speaker, Sir, be held on the premises of the National Assembly, and, as in the past, we shall look forward to the participation of Members from both sides of the House.

As regards part (d) of the question, the House will recall that on 29 March 2001, on the occasion of the launching of the consultative meeting for the educational primary sector, and in the presence of all interested parties, the primary curriculum renewal project was made public. Copies have since been sent to all MPs and a briefing session held here at the National Assembly on 11 April.

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58 MAY 2001

5

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CA/D07/P01/3

PNQ (Contd)

For recall, the reform proposals aimed at broadening the primary curriculum to provide our children with an education befitting their needs and serving the national interest. Since then, we have engaged wide consultations and discussions with all the unions of employees of the primary sector, head teachers, inspectors, representatives of all PTAs of primary schools as well as with the *Bureau d'Education Catholique* to consider the modalities of implementation of the proposed reforms.

The initial proposals of the Ministry of Education did include a revision of weekly school hours, that is, an increase of 15 minutes for Standard I, no increase for Standard II, a decrease of 15 minutes for Standard III and an increase of 45 minutes for Standards IV to VI, and the document, made public, stated at page 9 –

“Discussions will be held with the relevant trade unions, to explore the implications of the new curriculum, including the option for existing teachers to assume responsibility for new subject areas against payment of an allowance”.

However, in a correspondence recently addressed to the Ministry of Education, four unions of employees of the primary sector have indicated that they disagree with the principle of the extension of school hours and they have publicly stated that same was not in their view negotiable and moreover would not, in any circumstances, be acceptable. Accordingly, it would appear that the idea of a salary increase linked to implementation of the new curriculum and specifically to the extension of school hours no longer arises. I have, on many occasions, emphatically stated that there is no going back on the introduction, on the phasing in of a new curriculum as from next year. However, we shall leave no stone unturned to obtain the support of all stakeholders, so as to effect the implementation of the reform proposals in the most conducive environment.

Mr Speaker, Sir, being given the importance of the forthcoming reforms for our country and its children, I shall, once again, appeal to one and all that this matter to be discussed and debated in a non-partisan manner, and I trust that I may rely on the Opposition's co-operation in that respect.

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CA/D07/P04

PNQ (Contd)

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** Mr Speaker, Sir, I thank the hon. Minister of Education for his attempt to clarify certain points raised in the PNQ. The hon. Minister had made an appeal before to have the co-operation of one and all, including the Opposition. It is a difficult subject and I am sure that he now understands what are these difficulties. We are not here to *mettre des batons dans les roues*, but to find solutions which are acceptable to one and all, and we know what are the difficulties. Having said that, I must say that even though he mentioned what was said in the Presidential Address, there is a lot of confusion and that is why the question was asked. For example, I am surprised to hear the Minister say that, now, he proposes to meet all the stakeholders. I would have thought he should have met them first and then come with a solution, because, to me, that is the way for all sorts of problems that may arise. Therefore, can I ask the Minister whether he cannot, in any way, give some indication as to what kind of mechanism he is going to use for the grading system?

**Mr Obeegadoo:** Mr Speaker Sir, let me assure the hon. Leader of the Opposition that I am in constant contact with all the stakeholders, that is, we meet with the stakeholders before the preparation of the reforms, during the preparation process and afterwards, to discuss the detailed implementation modalities. We did that for the primary curriculum renewal project and we are doing the same for the next phase of the reform, that is, abolition of CPE ranking and regionalisation of admissions. As I explained earlier, this is a very sensitive subject. At this precise point in time, the Ministry is finalising the details, fine-tuning the time frame for implementation. It would have been very easy for me to come here and speak in vague terms, dropping an idea here and there, but I am sure the leader of the Opposition would agree that could only contribute to creating even further confusion. I wish to assure the leader of the Opposition and all Members of House that it is a matter of a very short time – days indeed - for the reforms to be made public. Thereafter, I shall be only too happy to be given the opportunity to answer as many questions as possible, explaining all the details of the reform project.

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8 MAY 2001

7

D07/IF/P02/1

PNQ (contd.)

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** If the hon. Minister of Education says we will get more details - this is a question of days - how is it that he says in his first answer that he proposes to meet the stakeholders again? Why is the Minister going to meet them again if he is ready with the report?

**Mr Obeegadoo:** Whatever we are doing at education we are endeavouring to do so in full transparency and in permanent consultation, that is, before reform proposals take shape there are consultations albeit informal if needs be. During the preparation of the reform proposals there are contacts and meetings. Once the broadlines are agreed Government is invited to pronounce upon the proposals and in this case the broad proposals have been agreed by Government last Friday. We are now in the process of fine-tuning the proposals in terms of modalities for the implementation and we shall meet first and foremost with the stakeholders - not by way of a Press Conference or whatever, but directly at full information, session with the stakeholders whereby the document will be made public, all information given and we shall listen to their views as regards the specific modalities of implementation. We shall simultaneously send copies to all Members of the House and then we shall have, as a priority, a meeting on the premises of the National Assembly to which all Members of the Opposition will be conveyed; and I do trust that, being given the interest the Members are showing in the subject, they will attend the meeting.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** Since the Minister says that he has been meeting them informally or whatever, that there has been constant meeting is he confident and optimistic that when he produces his final report that they will accept it and find that he has done a great job. Is he very optimistic about the end result?

**Mr Obeegadoo:** Mr Speaker, Sir, being given, first and foremost, the assurance to the Leader of the Opposition that this will matter not be dealt with in a partisan manner and that we shall have the co-operation and support of the Opposition on such a sensitive matter for the future of the country, I cannot but be optimistic.

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58 MAY 2007

8

D07/IF/P02/2

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** It is not just me and the Opposition; it means the stakeholders that are important, that is why I am asking this question. The Minister will have our support provided we agree with what he is doing. If we do not agree he will not have our support. Can I ask the hon. Minister if he can give us an indication on the grading system? Will it involve a continuous assessment within that grading system? Can he say that or he is not in a position to tell the House?

**Mr Obeegadoo:** Mr Speaker, Sir, the question is only a few days short. I would appeal to the hon. Leader of the Opposition to bear with us for a few more days and, thereafter, we shall be only too happy to respond to the detailed questions the Opposition may have.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** If the hon. Minister is going to publish it in a few days there is no harm in telling the House whether the grading system will include continuous assessment. But I suppose that he is not prepared to say more about the grading system, because I want to know whether the best graded students will have access to the star colleges like Royal College, Curepipe or Queen Elizabeth College and so on?

**Mr Obeegadoo:** Mr Speaker, Sir, I cannot say more. However, should I be conferred the honour of having another PNQ addressed to me in the next few weeks, I shall be only too pleased to provide all the information.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** The Minister has said that this would be the last year we have the CPE ranking system. When he himself was in the Opposition he was asking the Minister involved if it was the last time he was having the CPE exams as people wanted to know. I remember he said that people want to know about it even one year before. Can I just ask another matter that he referred to? I heard the Minister say that although the unions and other stakeholders were agreeable in principle to the extension of school hours but the question of payment and allowance does not arise because they say it is not negotiable. In other words will the Minister extend school hours or will he not?

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D07/IF/P02/3

**Mr Obeegadoo:** Sir, I have already stated very clearly that this year will be the last CPE examination as we know it, that is, with ranking. This year will be the last; and changes will be effected for the CPE examinations at the end of next year. That is being made public already. After the extension of school hours were announced – I have just given the details level wise at the primary level – the unions wrote to the Ministry and made public statements to say that they were against the principle of extending school hours and that it was not negotiable. We are, therefore, listening and talking to them. What is important for Government is that the reforms go through. There can be no going back, no turning on the principle of the reforms going through, that is, a new curriculum, a new set of subjects being introduced at primary level. The modalities as to how that is going to be done can always be discussed. The essence of the reforms is renewing the curriculum, introducing a broader curriculum with new subject areas. That is not negotiable from Government's point of view.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** Can I have a precise answer from the Minister? In a blue paper it is said that in Std I the extension will be 15 minutes, nothing for Std II, 15 minutes for Std III and 45 minutes for Std IV to VI. Therefore, there will be an overall increase in time. Will he be extending the hours or will he try to reduce it so that there is no conflict with the unions who say they do not agree with the principle? I thought you had said they agreed with the principle.

**Mr Obeegadoo:** I do not want to be repetitive, Mr Speaker, Sir. I said that proposals had been made for the modalities. We are talking, listening and consulting as we always do, Government will then take a decision if we need to go back to Government on the modalities. In the meantime, we shall leave, as I said, no stone unturned, to ensure that we can take on board all the stakeholders so that we give all the chances of successful implementation to the proposed reforms.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** On regionalisation, Sir, it is said in the Presidential Address and we also said it that we want regionalisation. Is Government going ahead with that? What is the time limit that the Minister is prepared to tell the House about the identification of schools? I suppose the Minister has done the school mapping and all this.

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D07/IF/P02/4

**Mr Obeegadoo:** As stated in the Presidential Address the commitment which Government intends to uphold is that admission to secondary schools will be regionalised according to a formula guaranteeing a fair measure of parental choice and affording due recognition to the specificities of confessional secondary schools. So, it stands to reason from the paragraph I have just read that there will be within the mechanism to be defined a certain dose of flexibility so that there will be no single school, no single model imposed on each and every one. We believe that parental choice is a very important measure and principle which needs to be accommodated within the regionalisation formula.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** I think we all agree that parental choice is important. That is why I ask the question and may be the Minister can tell us whether the best graded students will have access to the star colleges like Queen Elizabeth, Royal College of Cureipe etc. as he said that there would be a degree of flexibility?

**Mr Obeegadoo:** Mr Speaker, Sir, as everybody knows, the mechanism of ranking is inextricably linked to the existence of perceived star schools. That is why abolition of CPE ranking has been a vexed issue for many years and any formula to address abolition of CPE ranking must perforce include consideration of the issue of star schools. I shall again appeal to the hon. Leader of the Opposition to bear with us for a few days while we fine-tune and finalise our detailed proposals.

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11

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DR/D07/P03/1  
(PNQ CONT'D)

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** Mr Speaker, Sir, there is a sad confusion by the way the Minister of Education is answering. What would be the flexibility that he will give for parental choice? Would he be able to give some explanation on that?

**Mr Obeegadoo:** Same will be clear within a few days and I shall, thereafter, be willing to answer any questions.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** The Minister is not prepared to give details or only in a few days we will hear about it. Since the Minister is talking about his paper on training for IT and other new teachers that he will take, is he already going ahead with the training of those teachers? Because if you want to have, for a last time, the CPE examinations as it is, you will need those teachers very quickly. So, has this training started?

**Mr Obeegadoo:** Mr Speaker, Sir, I share the concern of the Leader of the Opposition. We are working at full speed on the implementation of the proposals for the new curriculum. Masters IT Lab, as we may choose to call them, will be very shortly recruited and thereafter will be provided with a crash training course to allow us to phase in the introduction of IT in schools as from next year.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** Where will the hon. Minister recruit those teachers from? Will he recruit them from the general pool or would he have specialised teachers?

**Mr Obeegadoo:** Teachers will be recruited from the public.

**Mr Dooloo:** Sir, this is most unacceptable. The Minister just keeps us in the dark and he keeps on talking. We are now in May. He says by the end of the year, this would be the last time that we are having the present examination system. So, next year there would be a new curriculum, a new system that would be put in. So, may I ask him whether he has informed the stakeholders and given them an indication? We are kept in the dark. This House is kept in the dark. Can we know whether indications have been given to the directorates, the heads of schools, teachers and parents, those doing fifth standard, for example, in what direction we are moving, what sort of formula as far as the new system is concerned, about the preparation for the curriculum?

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DR/D07/P03/2  
(PNQ CONT'D)

**Mr Obeegadoo:** Sir, as I said, the curriculum reform proposals were made public at the end of March. Since then I have been on television, on radio, I have talked to all the stakeholders, including head teachers and inspectors. I know my good friend, the hon. Member, apparently did not receive somehow the invitation for the last meeting. I shall personally ensure that the next time in all the briefing sessions he does obtain the invitation. I am grateful he, in fact, attended the first information meeting we had. So, yes we have been talking to the stakeholders. We have had a multitude of informal meetings indicating what direction we are moving in. Curriculum has already been publicised over the last five weeks and we will be actively engaged for the next few months in explaining, informing and popularising our reform proposals.

*(Interruption)*

**Dr. David:** That was planned, Mr Speaker, Sir.

**Mr Speaker:** Order!

**Dr. David:** *400 bus et 2,500 dimounes! Ca même tout!*

**Mr Speaker:** Order please!

**Dr. David:** Mr Speaker, Sir, we have heard, at least, two indications from the Minister: one is regionalisation and the second one is that there will be Form VI schools. I have two questions. The first question is: how will grading be used as criteria for admission in these regional schools? The second question is: will the brightest students have access to QEC and Royal Colleges? Will there be Form I in Royal Colleges, QEC or not?

And the third question is: if you will have Form VI schools, how long will it take for QEC, for example, to phase in Form VI schools from what it is at the moment?

**Mr Obeegadoo:** First and third questions are most interesting and will comprise the backbone of the proposals to be made public.

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