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ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

EDUCATIONAL REFORMS - IMPLEMENTATION

The Leader of the Opposition (Dr. N. Ramgoolam) (*By Private Notice*) asked the Minister of Education and Scientific Research whether, in regard to the implementation of education reforms, he will state -

- (a) the provisions and procedures for admissions in January 2003 to Form I and Lower VI;
- (b) how the new Form VI schools will be managed and administered;
- (c) the number of subjects taught and examined at CPE and the arrangements made for their teaching, and
- (d) the reasons behind the deteriorating relations between Government and primary school teachers and their consequences on the reforms.

Mr Obeegadoo: Sir, may I be allowed, at the very outset, to thank the hon. Leader of the Opposition for his renewed interest in the educational reforms.

Principles governing admission to Form I in Year 2003 were spelt as far back as in May 2001 in the document produced by my Ministry entitled "Ending the Rat Race in Primary Education and Breaking the Admission Bottleneck at Secondary Level". At pages 24-25 of the said document, it was clearly explained that, and I quote -

"For the purpose of admission to and management of schools in the new system, the island of Mauritius will be divided into four regions while Rodrigues will be considered as a separate region as follows -

Region 1	Port Louis and North
Region 2	Beau Bassin-Rose Hill, Centre and East
Region 3	Curepipe and South
Region 4	Quatre-Bornes, Vacoas-Phoenix and West
Region 5	Rodrigues

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Each region combines rural and urban areas so as to ensure effective parental choice in as much as within any particular region, parents may apply freely to any State Secondary School.

What will be the admission criteria?

Where any secondary school is over-subscribed, selection of students to be admitted by the Mauritius Examinations Syndicate (MES) in the academic mainstream will be effected on the basis of the following criteria in order of importance -

1. CPE Grade Aggregate
2. Residence"

The CPE aggregate, Mr Speaker, Sir, is of course the sum of numerical grades obtained by students in the examinable subject. In the case of oriental languages, these subjects will be conferred the same status as all other examinable subjects at the CPE exams of 2004.

For admission to Form I in 2003, the present arrangement in terms of reserved seats in State Secondary Schools for oriental languages will be maintained but on a regional basis. It should be pointed out that since January 2002, Form I at the Rabindranath Tagore Institute provides for an additional number of 48 reserved seats for the oriental languages. Such reserved seats should also be available in the new Mahatma Gandhi Secondary School planned for coming into operation in January 2003 in Centre de Flacq, Moka and Solferino, Vacoas.

Further, as is presently the case, the best overall performance for each primary school shall be brought to the place in a State secondary school. Practical arrangements for the 2003 Form I admission procedures are in the process of being finalised with the Mauritius Examinations Syndicate which, as in the past, will have overall responsibility for the marking of CPE examinations scripts, processing of results and attribution of places in Form I. What is presently envisaged is that all students taking the CPE Examinations in 2002 would be provided with a regional computer list offering all available places in State secondary schools, including Mahatma Gandhi secondary schools, subject to the earlier mentioned reserved seats for

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oriental languages. Furthermore, the regional computer list would also offer half the seats available in Private secondary schools, both confessional and non-confessional. It stands to reason that in each region, there would be 2 computer lists; one for boys and one for girls.

In line with the CPE results, successful candidates will be offered places in secondary schools of their regions and will also be at liberty to seek admission in any private secondary school of the country. As explained in the May 2001 document, private secondary schools will be encouraged to adopt the regional set-up but whether they do so would be within their discretion. For recall, the State sector will in 2003, be offering some 8,500 places in Form I as opposed to 6,400 in 2002 and 5,200 places in 2001. In other words, with the new set-up, there would be, in addition, some 3,300 places in Form I.

As regards admission to Lower VI in 2003, I will again refer to the May 2001 document of my Ministry which clearly stated that admission would be on the basis of grade aggregate obtained at the School Certificate examination and combination of subjects offered. Here again, practical arrangements are being fine-tuned with the Mauritius Examinations Syndicate, but what has already been announced holds good in that admission to Lower VI will be on a national basis with the number of seats in State secondary schools rising from 3,200 in 2001/2002 to 4,200 in January 2003. Some 17 Form VI colleges will be operational and all students completing Form V in a State secondary school, subject to obtention of basic requirements to accede to HSC, will be guaranteed a place in 2003 in a State Form VI College.

As regards part (b) of the question, there will be no significant difference in the management and administration of Form VI colleges as compared to present Form I - VI colleges. It should be recalled that of the 17 State Form VI colleges, 11 will be embarking on a gradual conversion process with no Form I admission and it is therefore only in 2007 that they will become full Form VI colleges. Whereas five (5) new Form VI colleges will accommodate only Lower VI in January 2003 - five in Mauritius and one in Rodrigues, six in all.

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Accordingly, the Ministry will maintain for year 2003 present administrative arrangements while studying all suggestions formulated for the management of Form VI colleges, keeping in mind international experience and local specificities, before we gradually evolve our own Form VI management system in the years to come.

As regards part (c) of the question, a circular letter was issued to all teachers and parents of CPE students at the beginning of the year to clarify the situation for Standard VI and CPE in 2002. In addition, the MES earlier this year produced its annual regulations and syllabuses for the CPE Examinations. In 2001, 8 subjects were taught in Standard VI: Mathematics, English, French, Creative Education, Movement Education, oriental languages, Religious Instruction and EVS. In 2002 the number of taught subjects has increased to 10 with the splitting of EVS into 3 distinct parts: (1) Science, (ii) History and Geography and (iii) Citizenship Education. In fact, as from January 2002, components of the existing EVS syllabus for Standards IV-VI had been spread across the 3 abovementioned subject areas: Science, History and Geography, Citizenship Education, but for Std VI, the very same EVS textbook used in 2001 is being used.

For CPE 2001, there were 4 examinable subjects, being Mathematics, English, French and EVS, whereas in 2002, the number has been increased to 5 with the replacement of the EVS paper by 2 distinct papers for Science on the one hand and History & Geography on the other. Parents and teachers have been provided with all details as to how the EVS syllabus has been rearranged, implying no additional burden for either students or teachers.

Regarding the arrangements for teaching, it is to be noted that all Standard VI teachers have had briefing sessions at the National Centre for Curriculum Research and Development (NCCRD) regarding Citizenship Education, Science and History and Geography.

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Sir, the final part of the question refers to the publicly aired disagreement of some trade unionists of the primary sector with the Ministry of Education concerning conditions of employment of teachers. These trade unionists claim that they have been for many years campaigning for an increase in salary for primary school teachers and that they have been taken for a ride by the previous Government in that the announced revision of conditions of employment never took place. Their argument, in a sense, is that since the quasi-totality of new recruits into the primary teaching profession, since 1999 are HSC holders, the scheme of service for that post should be amended to redefine the entry qualification as HSC rather than SC and salary of all teachers presently in post, whether SC or HSC holders, to be upgraded to the HSC salary scale within the PRB framework.

The stand of Government is as follows. Firstly, although it is true that some 20% of primary school teachers are now HSC holders, re-classification of salary scales and attendant benefits is a complex matter to be viewed within the global relativity perspective of public sector conditions of employment and can only thus be considered by the PRB which provides the acknowledged waged setting mechanism for employees of the State sector and of many para-statal bodies, as supported by the trade union movement nationally. Secondly, the fact that posts requiring SC are increasingly being filled by HSC holders is a phenomenon linked to the evolution of the labour market nationally and is as true of the nursing profession, the Police and Fire Service personnel and State clerical cadre as it is of primary education. Accordingly, re-classification of salaries cannot be viewed on a sectoral basis and can only be considered globally.

Nonetheless, Government remains committed to the upgrading of teachers' status as a gradual and multi-dimensional process involving earnings, but also training facilities, access to pedagogical aids, and the working environment generally. That is why the last Budget provided for a package of measures totalling some R 65 m. at least consisting of allowances for teachers involved in a new National Literacy and Numeracy Scheme, creation of 50 posts of Mentors/*Conseillers Pédagogiques* and free

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computer proficiency courses for all primary school teachers in 2002-03 quite apart from the special classes for oriental languages which will yet further increase the take-home package for oriental language teachers at least in the primary sector. Hence, our belief that upgrading of teachers' status cannot be divorced from the process of reforms in education and reforms in education naturally entail upgrading of teachers' status.

It is a matter of great regret that at a time when Government is ushering in a truly historical reform in education aiming at democratisation of access, curricular renewal for greater relevance, pedagogical renewal and raising of standards of achievement generally, some trade unionists should place narrow corporatist interests before the common good. Nonetheless my Ministry will pursue its consultation and dialogue with all trade unions and I shall be personally meeting those of the primary in the coming weeks.

Dr. Ramgoolam: Mr Speaker, Sir, after this long explanation, let me assure the hon. Minister that it is not renewed interest. If he came to our meetings or if he looks at the NIU reports, he will see that we are talking about education all the time. As for part (a) of the question, he ended up by saying that the process is after all being finalised. So, it is not final. In spite of the fact that he mentioned the memorandum of May 2001, the finality of the process is still being done. Can he confirm that?

Mr Obeegadoo: Let me first of all ensure the Leader of the Opposition that there was nothing wrong when I referred to renewed interest. It was merely to welcome their interest in educational reforms and I must say that the Opposition has been very supportive of the process of educational reforms. So much the better for it. My point, Mr Speaker, Sir, was that the principles governing the admission in 2003 - the mechanism and the criteria - have been fully spelt out as far back as May 2001 and today I was essentially repeating what I said in May 2001. But there are practical arrangements. For instance, we have invited all private secondary schools of the land to offer to the State half of their places for admissions.

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This has to be discussed with managers. A shared understanding has to be involved with the federation of managers and we know that there are about 100 private secondary schools. This process is on the way and should be finalised shortly. In the same manner, with a major change in the CPE results, the ranking disappearing from the results slip, processing being altogether different, the computer list, instead of being limited to some 40 schools, next year, it will be 40 per region possibly. So, it is much more complex and we are now involved in capacity building at the MES because all this process, as we know, is a computerised process, an objective treatment of results and application for Form I seats, it is in that sense that I said that the practical arrangements are being fine-tuned and will continue being fine-tuned up and till the end of the year. We can always improve so that we ensure that the process at the end of the year be a smooth one causing no dissatisfaction to parents and students.

Dr. Ramgoolam: In spite of the fact that the hon. Minister says there will be more places, can I ask him how he will proceed if there is excess demand for one college in one particular area?

Mr Obeegadoo: The objective of the reform is parity of esteem for all secondary schools. That is why, within the last Budget, we have provided for a new scheme to allow for upgrading of private secondary schools and we are discussing regularly with managers to see how, within the next five years, we can move towards parity of esteem. But, of course, the Leader of the Opposition is right - inevitably certain schools will be the exceptions - because all State star schools are becoming Form VI colleges. So, in terms of public perception, the State star schools should, in principle, be at par, except the few exceptional cases, as regards equal grade aggregates for the last places to be filled, then the residential factor comes into play, to give priority to students who live closer to that specific college.

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PNQ (CONTD)

Dr. Ramgoolam: I wanted to have this clarification from the Minister, and I would like to tell him that this is why we don't agree at all with what he is doing. He should not think that we are approving of what he is doing, including the agreements that he has signed. If the Minister is going to use proximity as a criteria, doesn't he think that he is going to bring in an element of unfairness? In other words, we will have some sort of ranking in spite of the fact that we are abolishing ranking.

Mr Obeegadoo: Certainly not, Mr Speaker. That has nothing to do with ranking. History is history; the facts are the facts. And I will recall that when my predecessor brought in his Action Plan, what did he propose? He proposed a formula, which was interesting, but which was unrealistic. He proposed that we would have entrance into secondary colleges, being in terms of a catchment area. So, we would have four or five schools whose students would automatically join the very same secondary college. And my good friend, Kadress Pillay, had no intention, I am sure, of substituting another form of ranking. He was merely looking at getting students to travel less, moving towards parity of esteem so that all secondary colleges would be considered on a par. It is the same principle that is being adopted now. Within a region - and a region is quite large - let us say Port Louis and the North, which is one single region, any student living anywhere in that region has a free choice of the secondary college which he wants to attend or which, at least, his parents want him to attend in the region. But, if for any college in that region, exceptionally, there should be tie as between the last students applying, then the residential address will be the deciding factor so that students do not have to travel huge distances, as is presently the case. So, there is no issue of ranking whatsoever.

Dr. Ramgoolam: I would like the Minister to know that we are not talking about the Action Plan. We did not accept the Action Plan. There has never been final approval of the Action Plan because of certain flaws contained in it. What the Minister is saying, therefore, is that proximity will be a factor, that is, the further you reside from a college, the chances for you to be admitted to that college are less. If that is not discrimination, what is discrimination then?

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Mr Obegadoo: Mr Speaker, residential proximity is a factor. For 2003 admissions, the first factor is reserved seats for oriental languages. The second factor, introduced by Mr Parsuramen or Mr Pillay, is a very good principle, that is, any child from any primary school, if he obtains the best grades, should be entitled to a seat in a State secondary school, and we are preserving that. Once we have gone past those two hurdles, the next hurdle is the attribution of places according to CPE grade aggregate. It is only if when attributing the last few places there is a tie in terms of grade aggregate that the residential factor comes into play. The residential factor comes into play so that priority is given to a child who lives closer to that specific college. That is certainly not discrimination. How do you go about attribution of places? At one extreme, you have the present ranking system which brings immense pressure to bear upon students, parents and teachers and any self-respecting educationalist of this country or any other country would say that the present ranking system in Mauritius cannot stand the test of a modern society in terms of fairness. That is out. The other extreme is the catchment area principle, which was canvassed by my predecessor, the then Minister, Kadress Pillay, and which was an interesting idea. Maybe in 20 or 30 years' time Mauritius might opt for that principle, as it exists in other countries like England, France and so on. Ours is a compromise. We have regions under the new system so that no student has to travel long distances. My attention was brought to cases of two girls in Form I travelling from Chemin Grenier to Bel Air. This can no longer be the case under the new system. There is region and within the region there is a great measure of caring for a choice. But, in exceptional cases, where a school is oversubscribed, the residential factor comes in just as according to the catchment area principle, just as is the case for primary schools. The Leader of the Opposition should know what decides admissions right now if you want your child to get admitted to primary school. It is according to catchment areas. Each high-demand primary school has a catchment area. This system existed under Mr Parsuramen, Hon. David, Mr Pillay and it still exists today. And nobody cries out that it is discriminatory. So, why should it be discriminatory for Form I?

Dr. Ramgoolam: The hon. Minister knows very well that it is not the same thing. He knows very well! Would this not give rise to abuse? Won't people try to change address in order to be as near as possible to the school they want?

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Mr Obeegadoo: This is a very pertinent point, Mr Speaker. Right now, we are discussing with the State Law Office on how to tighten up the control procedures for Standard I. We know - and it is true - that there is considerable abuse for some primary schools. So, I am firstly redefining catchment areas to ensure that you can no longer have certain schools where there exist more than 43 or 44 pupils in a class. So, we have to redefine catchment areas. Secondly - and this is a very complicated problem which has confronted all Ministers of Education - how do you ensure compliance with the law? How do you have a foolproof device and then, eventually, go and prosecute parents for false declaration of residential address? We are working at that and whatever solution we arrive at will apply for Standard VI as well as for Form I. We are looking at the possibility that, for Form I, when the parent submits his computer form, he is made to state once again the residential address of the child at the time of applying for admission in Form I. And we are discussing with the State Law Office on how to make this declaration operative in terms of inquiry and eventual prosecution. There again, if the Opposition has any constructive ideas, I will be very happy to take same on board.

Dr. Ramgoolam: Once the parent has declared the residential address on the form, is the Minister going to prevent them from changing address?
(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order! Order, please!

Mr Obeegadoo: Mr Speaker, in any system of education administration, you need rules and regulations, which allow for flexibility. So much so that if ever a parent changes his address and can establish that this is genuine, of course, the natural results will follow.

Dr. David: Mr Speaker, coming back to this question of catchment and region, the Minister knows quite well that there is a difference between catchment and region. Catchment is defined in the regulations and the Minister himself, ...

(Interruptions)

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Mr Speaker: Order, please! Hon. Baloomoody, I am calling you to order!

Dr. David: Mr Speaker, Sir, I am certainly not giving way. The question is that the Minister himself has defined various regions for the admission to Form I in 2003. Consequently, the idea of catchment being mixed with region will not only create a lot of confusion, but this is also unacceptable. The question, Mr Speaker, Sir, is: what will happen, as the Leader of the Opposition has said, if demand exceeds supply in one region? Will there not be geographical discrimination, that is, the one living nearer to the school may be admitted and the one within the region, as defined by the Minister may be left out?

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Mr Obeegadoo: Again, a very good point. Since we have been working on these reform plans as from end 2000, we have been very careful to ensure that supply of places and anticipated demand, in each and every region, tally. That is why certain regions, like Vacoas, Quatre Bornes West, are smaller than other regions like Port Louis North. The region has been defined as a function of the number of primary schools, the number of student population and the number of seats at secondary level. I would also invite the hon. Member to keep in mind that the other half of seats available in private secondary schools can be attributed, as the managers think fit, within the region or beyond the region; it can be national. Outside this august Assembly, you have London College. It may freely choose to offer us half of its seats, which will be attributed on a strictly regional basis, and the other half can take on board students from Beau Bassin, Rose Hill and elsewhere.

Mr Dulloo: Mr Speaker, Sir, concerning admission to Form VI, I would like to ask the hon. Minister how, by going by grade aggregates, would students be admitted to Form VI at QEC, Royal Colleges next year, and whether he is not going to have recourse to ranking, since this is being done on a national basis.

Mr Obeegadoo: There will be ranking, as per grade aggregates. Right now, every year, we have a number of vacant places at QEC, Royal College Curepipe and Royal College Port Louis. These are advertised in a transparent manner; students apply for transfers from other schools, and those with the best aggregates are offered those places. So, the practice, the mechanism does exist. It will simply be generalised for January 2003. For instance, Royal College Curepipe Lower VI will offer such and such combination of subjects; those places will be advertised, stating the number of places, so that there is full transparency; applications will be considered, will be processed by the MES – not by the Ministry of Education – looking at the grade aggregates, and the best students will obtain the places.

Mr Dulloo: There would be ranking for admission in colleges. Therefore, may I ask the hon. Minister what would happen to those students who have just finished Form V? At what time will they have access to Lower VI? Where will they go, pending the results? Because there are no Form VI classes in the colleges where they are.

Mr Obeegadoo: Those are all very good questions at which we have been working for many months. Let me state, once again, that all students of State secondary schools, completing their School Certificate, with the requirements to go on to HSC, will be guaranteed a place in a

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PNQ (contd)

State Form VI college. Right now, the MES is in the final phases of consultation with the Cambridge Syndicate, to ensure earlier obtention of SC results, which will allow for proper processing and admissions as early as possible in the year.

Mr Speaker: Last question.

Dr. Ramgoolam: We would like to ask many questions, Mr Speaker, Sir, but if you say last question, I will accept.

The hon. Minister has, again, found it fit to insult trade unionists. Can I ask him why does he not make public the Sewraz Report?

Mr Obeegadoo: The Leader of the Opposition said there are many questions. Let me say, again, that I am at the disposal of the Opposition, to answer any queries, they may have, in this House. With the permission of my Prime Minister, I shall gladly meet the Parliamentary Labour Party, to answer any queries they may have as regards educational reforms. Let us take this issue of the Sewraz Report. Because we were genuine in our desire to upgrade status of teachers, I commissioned an internal report from my then Director for primary studies, Mr Sewraz, on status of teachers in general; sources of frustration, complaints and different avenues for policy making. The report was submitted to us, and it was leaked to the press by the president of the Government Hindi Teachers Union, who has bragged about it publicly. So, it is a secret to nobody that the Sewraz Report, on the one hand, says that working hours for all teachers should be extended. But, how do you do that, legally and administratively? On the other hand, it says that the excessive number of holidays for primary teachers should be cut. But, how do you do that? Then, it says that salaries should be upgraded. So, what Government decided was that this report, prepared by an educationist, needs to be analysed from the administrative point of view and from the financial perspective, and it is still being worked out. Eventually – this is my personal opinion – with the permission of Government, I would have no objection to publicising the recommendations of the report. That is no problem. But, what is the key issue? Why are trade unions asking for the Sewraz Report? It is not because it says that holidays must be cut, that working hours must be extended, but because it mentions increase in salary. In my answer, I have clearly explained what is the stand of Government, that you cannot, unilaterally, sectorally, go for salary increase, when you have the whole of the public sector, where there is the element of relativity governed by the PRB framework.
