

## Covid-19

**WRITTEN ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS  
COVID-19 VACCINATION CAMPAIGN – PFIZER VACCINES –  
CHILDREN – 5-11 YEARS  
(17.05.2022)**

**(No. B/690) Mrs S. Luchmun Roy (Second Member for Port Louis North & Montagne Longue)** asked the Minister of Health and Wellness whether, in regard to the COVID-19 Vaccination Campaign for Children between 5 to 11 years, he will state the number of Pfizer vaccines received therefor, indicating the –

- (a) mechanism set up for the carrying out thereof, and
- (b) number of vaccines administered as at to date.

*(Withdrawn)*

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### **SPECIFIC MATTER: COVID-19 PANDEMIC – ONLINE TEACHING – STUDENTS - DISPARITIES (17.05.2022)**

**Mrs A. Navarre-Marie (Fourth Member for GRNW & Port Louis West):** Merci, M. le président.

M. le président, avec la fermeture des écoles pendant la pandémie, les enseignants se sont tournés vers les applications d'Internet pour l'apprentissage des élèves. Mais, étant donné que de nombreux parents sont dépourvus des compétences nécessaires pour accéder à l'Internet, aux *iPads* et à l'équipement d'apprentissage à distance et la formation pour l'utiliser, une vérité est rapidement apparue - de nombreux enfants sont restés à la maison sans éducation pendant plusieurs mois.

La pandémie a révélé des lacunes dans notre système éducatif pour des centaines d'élèves, en particulier dans les familles où les adultes et les enfants manquent de compétence numérique, l'éducation a été suspendue à la fermeture des classes. De nombreux enfants n'ont reçu aucune éducation après la fermeture des écoles. Certaines écoles n'offrent tout simplement pas d'enseignement à distance. D'autres qui pouvaient l'offrir ont constaté que les élèves et/ou les enseignants n'avaient pas d'iPad, l'accès à l'Internet ou les compétences nécessaires pour qu'il soit efficace.

Le fossé de l'éducation numérique a davantage creusé les inégalités qui existaient déjà. Alors que les élèves les plus aisés ont pu poursuivre leur parcours d'apprentissage à travers l'Internet, d'autres enfants ont été incapables de suivre le pas. Mais, il n'y a pas eu de monitoring approprié pour s'assurer que ceux qui avaient accès aux équipements avaient vraiment suivi le cours en ligne et d'autres enfants encore ont décroché.

Comment pouvons-nous dispenser les cours numériquement ? 0Le gouvernement avait préconisé la mise sur pied d'une *e-platform* dans son dernier discours sur le budget. Ne devrait-on pas se mettre à la tâche très vite en consultant les différents partenaires de l'éducation? Une assise de l'éducation est nécessaire afin de soutenir l'apprentissage en ligne et le renforcement des compétences, d'échanger des bonnes pratiques et voir comment mettre sur pied ce *e-platform* rapidement pour éviter de creuser davantage les écarts entre nos enfants. Un *survey* doit également être effectué pour connaître le nombre d'enfants ayant décroché.

Ce projet, M. le président, devra veiller à ce que l'enseignement et l'apprentissage restent ouverts et accessibles à tous à travers la République en préservant le droit à l'éducation pour tous, surtout en cas de crise. Le projet se devrait d'aller au-delà de la situation actuelle et d'ouvrir un nouveau chapitre numérique sur l'équité et la qualité de l'éducation, que ce soit en temps de crise ou pas. Quelques pays d'Afrique s'y sont déjà attelés à la tâche. Nous nous vantons souvent d'être parmi les premiers en termes d'accès à l'éducation sur le continent africain, mais force est de constater que nous sommes à la traîne derrière l'Égypte, l'Éthiopie et le Ghana.

Une suggestion serait un apprentissage hybride dans les moments de pandémie. Les classes se font normalement avec la moitié de la classe en présentiel et l'autre moitié à domicile et suivant les cours en ligne pendant une semaine et la semaine suivante, on alterne. Ceux qui était en présentiel, suivent les cours en ligne et ceux qui suivaient la classe en ligne sont en présentiel. Cela permettra à tous les enfants de suivre les classes tout en gardant le contact physique avec leurs camarades et leurs enseignants. C'est une suggestion à être étudiée et considérée en consultation avec les différents partenaires de l'éducation.

Je fais, ici, un plaidoyer afin que le ministère entame le plus vite possible des consultations avec les différents partenaires de l'éducation pour la mise en œuvre d'un nouveau système qui permettrait à tous nos enfants d'avoir accès à l'éducation à travers les nouvelles technologies *so that no child is left behind*.

Je vous remercie.

**The Deputy Speaker:** Thank you very much. Hon. Vice-Prime Minister, please!

**The Vice-Prime Minister, Minister of Education, Tertiary Education, Science and Technology (Mrs L. D. Dookun-Luchoomun):** Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021, my Ministry elaborated a National Education Resilience Strategy to provide an immediate response and ensure continuity in teaching and learning. The objective was to ensure that learners were not disconnected from their studies due to school closures.

The Strategy comprised various components, namely –

- the broadcast of educational programmes on MBC's Learning Channels for primary and lower secondary students, that is, from Grades 1 to 9;

- access to online educational resources available on the Student Support Portal for lower secondary students, and these resources were also made available on the MBC TV Learning Channels as we were aware that some students did not have digital devices,
- the conduct of online classes for upper secondary students in Grades 10 to 13, and this involved the creation of credentials to access the Microsoft Teams platforms. Overall, about 8,500 educators' credentials and around 40,000 credentials for students of Grades 10 to 13 were created.

Equally conscious of the fact that many students did not have access to digital devices and internet connectivity, Government decided, in a spirit of ensuring equity and overcoming learning roadblocks, to provide digital devices and internet connectivity to students whose families were on the Social Register of Mauritius (SRM). The Ministry of Social Integration, Social Security and National Solidarity catered for these students by providing 1,125 tablets to the students.

Furthermore, I am informed by the Ministry of Social Integration, Social Security and National Solidarity that provisions were made in the Budget for the Mauritius Telecom to provide free access to broadband internet connectivity to about 7,000 families on the Social Register of Mauritius (SRM).

But, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, we are aware that connectivity and devices were not the only problem. There was a need for teachers to get trained for such switch from face-to-face teaching to online teaching. Because of that, we ensured that training was offered to teachers. But then, training for a different approach to be adopted with online classes, was also considered. However, we must not forget that during that time, we were in confinement and people were not moving around. So, the training was done online.

Obviously, we also know that there are families who are not on the SRM and whose children face similar difficulties. So, Government came forward and put up a scheme at the Development Bank of Mauritius (DBM) for a loan of up to Rs50,000 for financing the purchase of digital devices, at an interest rate of only 3%. I am informed that in respect of this loan scheme, a total amount of Rs6.6 m. has already been disbursed.

Also, the Ministry of Information Technology, Communication and Innovation has deployed free internet connectivity in 250 WiFi hotspots and 100 public access points across

the island, and even in Rodrigues for the public. All primary schools are connected to internet. All secondary schools will shortly be connected to internet. Tenders are already out and all classes of all grades, libraries, labs and public areas within the schools would be connected.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, the hon. Fourth Member for Grand River North West & Port Louis West also raised the issue of training on the use of devices and educational platforms such as Microsoft Teams and the Student Support Portal. In fact, students from Grade 10 to 13 are already conversant with the use of digital devices; given that they are taught ICT at school up to Grade 9, and are familiar with the use of digital devices. We must not forget that as far as primary schools are concerned, as from 2017, students are provided with tablets in schools, in all grades, and we have now reached Grade 5. Next year, it will be Grade 6. Short videos targeting students were produced to improve their capacity to use these devices and to join the digital platforms. Training of educators, as I have said earlier, was also carried out and this training is ongoing, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir.

With a view to bridging the gap, my Ministry has come up with additional initiatives such as the distribution of learning packs to all pupils in the primary schools from Grades 1 to 6 and for all subjects. This proved useful to pupils to catch up with their studies if they had not been able to follow the educational lessons on MBC TV channels during the periods of school closure. Furthermore, the MBC managed to allow all these lessons on the four channels to be re-viewed in case parents could not get their children to follow the classes when they were broadcast.

On the other hand, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, to guard against the eventuality of increasing the gap between the students who had followed lessons via the different teaching modes and those who might not have educators, on resumption of schools, they were asked to engage in catch-up lessons. And based on their deeper knowledge about the learners' competencies, bring all pupils, more or less, on par.

Furthermore, in a bid to allow more time for students to better prepare themselves for sound learning, the 2021/2022 Academic Year has been extended to November 2022. This extension of the Academic Year enables the full coverage of the curriculum as well as the completion of course works and other practical sessions that were interrupted by the pandemic.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, several measures were resorted to allowing ample time for students to catch up and make good any learning loss arising from the school closures. We should all wise up to the reality that the impact of the pandemic on the education process has

not been an exclusive and characteristic feature of Mauritian schooling. In the world over, the impact has been the same. Highly developed countries too have borne the brunt and gaps have been noticed there as well, in the provision and access to digital devices.

Allow me, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, to reassure the hon. Member that Government is strongly and deeply conscious of its responsibility to be inclusive and to care for, as well as to cater for the learning needs of all of our children. As I have informed the House earlier, we have already started a hybrid program on a pilot basis and we intend to roll it out in all the other schools after the pilot phase. We intend to have both face-to-face and online classes. And we are starting very shortly with that. We are ready for it and this is what we intend to do.

This Government, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, is determined and fixed in its commitment to fight both learning lost and the factors that caused it. Now, what we intend to do also, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, is to come up with a series of programs for students at school ensuring that we can switch from the face-to-face learning to the online learning and vice versa.

So, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, as I have said earlier, we are aware that there are problems; problems have arisen elsewhere in the world, 180 countries had had school closures, 91% of students across the world have faced school closures. And we are all aware that the digital gap existed prior to the pandemic and will still exist, but we will do all that we can to ensure that this gap does not widen further but instead we need to bridge the gap, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir. Thank you.

**The Deputy Speaker:** Thank you very much, Vice-Prime Minister!

Thank you very much; have a safe trip back!