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28/6/09

EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS – CELLULAR PHONES - BAN

(No. B/644) Mrs A. Navarre-Marie (First Member for GRNW and Port Louis West) asked the Minister of Education, Culture and Human Resources whether he will state if he will consider the advisability of imposing a ban on the use of cellular phones by the students during school hours while being in the precincts of their respective educational institution.

(Withdrawn)

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EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS - CELLULAR PHONES – USE

(No. B/707) Mrs A. Navarre-Marie (First Member for GRNW and Port Louis West) asked the Minister of Education, Culture and Human Resources whether he will state if he will consider the advisability of imposing a ban on the use of cellular phones by the students during school hours while being in the precincts of their respective educational institution.

Reply: The use of mobile phones at schools is indeed a subject of debate at the international level and I must say that there are two schools of thoughts: on the one hand, it is viewed as a distraction to education, as a nuisance during classes and study while, on the other hand, it is reckoned as a means to keep in touch with parents and especially for emergency purposes.

In effect, many countries have moved towards forbidding the use of mobile phone on school premises and we are moving along the same line of thinking.

Presently, schools in Mauritius stand guided by two Circular letters which have been issued to our Primary and Secondary Schools as far back as in September 1999 and July 2001 which strictly prohibit students from using mobile phones in schools, especially in classrooms and during test and examinations.

In line with international trends, I am proposing to consider prohibiting the use of cellular phones by students on school premises during school hours or during test or examination periods.

They will be confiscated and returned to parents only when they come to school to claim them.

The modalities for implementation of this new policy are being worked out by my Ministry in consultation with parties concerned. Flouting the policy will entail a set of disciplinary actions, as may be appropriate.

On the other hand, our students have also been sensitized about the misuse of mobile phones. This is in fact an offence under section 47(1) of the ICT Act which provides for a fine of Rs1 m. and a term of imprisonment of less than five years on conviction.

29/6/10 (43)

SCHOOLS - TRUANCY

(No. 1B/164) Mr M. Seeruttun (Second Member for Vieux Grand Port & Rose Belle) asked the Minister of Education and Human Resources whether, in regard to truancy, he will state if his Ministry has carried out a study thereinto and, if so, the outcome thereof, indicating the measures that are envisaged to address the issue.

Dr. Bunwaree: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I would like, first of all, to thank the hon. Member for this question on truancy which is, in fact, linked with absenteeism and indiscipline in schools.

Indiscipline at school encompasses, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, a range of issues ranging from misbehaviour, acts of violence, flouting of school authority to truancy which is intrinsically linked to absenteeism. Often, it becomes difficult to differentiate between a genuine absence and truancy operating under the cover of an absence. Indiscipline, absenteeism and truancy have become issues of concern for the education sector in particular and the society at large.

Conscious of the need to address these issues holistically, I have, since March 2009, personally chaired a number of high-level meetings with the various stakeholders, namely, the Police, the *Brigade pour la Protection des Mineurs*, the Child Development Unit of the Ministry

of Gender Equality, Child Development and Family Welfare, the Probation and After Care Service and the State Law Office.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, we have to reckon with the fact that the issue of truancy cannot be seen in isolation but rather as part of a global concern that needs to be addressed. In fact, we want to give a strong signal to the nation on the matter. Our strategy to curb indiscipline must, therefore, involve the participation and partnership of all stakeholders and society at large. The focus of this well-thought through strategy rests on -

- (i) networking between the National Education Counselling Service of my Ministry, the *Brigade pour la Protection des Mineurs* and the Child Development Unit;
- (ii) sensitisation;
- (iii) prevention;
- (iv) intelligence-led policing and community participation;
- (v) enforcement and educational rehabilitation, and
- (vi) 'real time' communication with parents.

The networking established between these institutions provides a platform for exchange of vital information and much headway has been made in dealing with this issue. Hence, as such the need was not felt indispensable for a study.

The meetings held with the various stakeholders on the matter have served to engineer better coordination and concerted efforts in the strengthening of the surveillance system. Progress has definitely been noted as there has been a decline in the number of cases of truancy from 712 in 2008 to 548 in 2009 and standing at 270 for the first half of this year.

An aggressive sensitisation programme has been initiated and sustained in partnership with the stakeholders at school level since 2008 to date. This programme has covered some 36,000 students and has proved its efficacy and certainly contributed towards this declining trend. However, we are not contenting ourselves with this positive result. Efforts are being pursued to bring the situation further under control with the re-orientation of the sensitisation process so as to focus as much on the responsibilities of the parents and students as to their rights.

At the school level, an internal mechanism exists on discipline related issues and it acts as deterrence to truancy, with its graded system of sanctions. We want to work towards uniformising such a mechanism through the elaboration of a Charter for discipline, therefore, empowering the schools to better deal with the problem.

Networking with the Police, particularly with the *Brigade pour la Protection des Mineurs* is also being reinforced and patrols and crackdown operations have been intensified in the vicinity of schools which are considered at risk and public places likely to lure students into truancy.

The Police, on their part, are adopting a three-pronged strategy based on prevention, protection and prosecution. In line with these strategic pillars, they are having recourse to intelligence-led and community policing so as to circumscribe further cases of truancy-related indiscipline.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, the House will appreciate that community support is essential in this endeavour and is instrumental in helping the Police to act promptly by providing information they are privy to. Further, we are working with the Child Development Unit and the Ombudsperson for Children to better increase students' awareness of their responsibility and improve their civic behaviour, whether at school or outside.

I am glad to state that, along with the Ministry of Information and Communication Technology, we are finalising the details pertaining to 'real time' communication with parents through the introduction of an SMS service. This will instantly apprise parents of unexcused absences of their wards with a view to further curtailing the risk of truancy.

On a much larger scale, my Ministry is having in-depth discussions for a review of the existing legislations, including the Juvenile Offenders Act so as to find ways and means of curbing truancy, through the institutionalisation of community service and the organisation of retreats. This, I believe, will indubitably serve as a strong deterrent to juvenile offenders.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, the spate of measures being acted upon, while sufficiently broad and comprehensive, are certainly not exhaustive. There will undoubtedly be other avenues that will have to be explored such that truancy and its resulting ill effects can be effectively combated.

Mr Obeegadoo: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I am shocked that we are becoming the only country in the world where school truants are described as juvenile offenders, where school

discipline has become a matter of policing. Will the hon. Minister not agree that the fundamental problem is that of induced absenteeism whereby children in State Secondary Schools in Form V and Form VI do not attend school - and this is not a recent problem – and it is tolerated and some even say: abetted, encouraged? Will the hon. Minister not agree to address the fundamental problem of school leadership, management, discipline so that students are encouraged to attend and are made to find schooling relevant and interesting?

Dr. Bunwaree: Of course, this is being done, but if I go into all this, I will never end. If a proper question is put, I can tell the hon. Member what is being done to go in that direction. I never called the students offenders, but I said that the Juvenile Offenders' Act is being looked into to take care of certain aspects of truancy and certain activities in the vicinity of schools.

Mr Obeegadoo: Will the hon. Minister tell us whether he is envisaging a new initiative to work with the Rectors of these State Secondary Schools to make sure that students do attend school which is not - and I am sure the hon. Minister will agree - the case right now?

Dr. Bunwaree: This is being done. It is the case right now. But it has not taken *la vitesse de croisière*. But this also is, of course, being looked into and, very seriously, I can assure the hon. Member.

Mrs Ribot: M. le président, je voudrais savoir du ministre ce qu'il compte envisager comme mesure puisque plusieurs élèves qui font école buissonnière se retrouvent dans des maisons de jeux qui sont ouvertes toute la journée. Est-ce que le ministre envisage des mesures à l'encontre de ces maisons de jeux qui sont ouvertes toute la journée?

Dr. Bunwaree: Comme j'ai dit dans ma réponse, cette question a été soulevée dans plusieurs réunions de haut niveau et les résultats sont là. J'ai mentionné des chiffres. Je suis sûr et convaincu qu'on va continuer à les améliorer et à y mettre de l'ordre. Cette question est en train d'être étudiée par le gouvernement parce qu'on a mentionné dans le discours-programme qu'on va prendre des actions importantes. En ce qui concerne la fréquentation des maisons de jeux par les enfants de l'école, je pense qu'on va très vite agir sur ce problème.

Mrs Labelle: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, at a particular point in time, it was a question to come with regulations so that students attend a particular number of days to take part in SC or

HSC examinations. May I know from the hon. Minister where matters stand regarding this issue concerning the number of days to be attended before taking an examination?

Dr. Bunwaree: La régulation existe déjà en ce qui concerne des enfants qui vont prendre part aux examens de la HSC pour être lauréat ou non. On est en train de voir si on peut étendre cela à toutes les autres classes aussi. Une étude a déjà été faite, mais on va prendre des actions en même temps qu'on est en train de voir l'établissement de carnets scolaires pour les étudiants des écoles.

Mr Leopold: Can I ask the hon. Minister that once the SMS service is fully operational, whether it will be extended or at least make it available in Rodrigues?

Dr. Bunwaree: Surement car on est en train de voir cela, M. le président.

Mrs Labelle: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, the hon. Minister has just answered that this is actually the case for the HSC students, because I also mentioned SC students. If it is the case, what is the percentage or number of days that these students must attend schools? Because we are all aware that during the third trimester there are no pupils in schools for SC and HSC even as from the second part of the second trimester. What is the percentage?

Dr. Bunwaree: C'est défini en ce qui concerne la HSC, mais c'est à l'étude pour les autres classes. Il y a plusieurs autres choses à voir en même temps pour qu'on puisse mettre de l'ordre dans cette affaire.

Mrs Ribot: M. le président, nous savons très bien que la loi qui existe préconise que l'élève ne peut s'absenter plus de temps, plus de jours *unaccounted for*. Il y a la complicité des parents et des médecins puisque les élèves reviennent à l'école avec des certificats médicaux. Ils s'absentent pendant trois mois et ils sont toujours éligibles pour les bourses. Je voudrais savoir quelles sont les mesures que vous préconisez pour aller à l'encontre de cette pratique malheureuse ?

Dr. Bunwaree : Comme je l'ai dit, M. le président, cette pratique n'est pas appliquée à la lettre. Je ne sais pas si on peut appeler cela 'complicité', mais il y a aussi la difficulté que les éducateurs eux-mêmes ne veulent pas prendre des actions contre les enfants à cause d'un jour en plus ou en moins. Mais cet aspect doit être vu dans un ensemble de panoplie de mesures qu'on est en train de mettre sur pied pour pouvoir régler le problème fondamentalement.

The Deputy Speaker: The Table has been advised that Parliamentary Question Nos. 1B/205 and 1B/216 have been withdrawn. Now we move to PQ No. 1B/168!
