

Speech by Hon. Mrs LEELA DEVI DOOKUN-LUCHOOMUN
Ministry of Education & Human Resources,
Tertiary Education & Scientific Research
Venue: Society for the Welfare of the Deaf
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Distinguished Guests,

Ladies & Gentlemen,

A very good morning to you all!

I am pleased to be in your midst today for the 50th Anniversary of your School, an anniversary that so wonderfully coincides with the Golden Jubilee of our Independence.

50 years in the life of an organization definitely calls for celebrations.

May I here pay tribute to the successive corps of management and staff who have, over the years, set an exemplary footprint for the hearing-impaired community. You will all appreciate, for sure, that, this would not have been possible without the will power and determination of each one of you here present as well as your deeply- committed and selfless predecessors.

Ladies & Gentlemen,

I am happy to note that this golden anniversary serves to celebrate the achievements of the Deaf community. This anniversary should act as an impetus for the challenged students to stand out and be daring.

Rest assured that my Ministry will always be there to support such endeavours. This is our sacrosanct duty and responsibility. It is directly in line with the several measures taken by my Ministry to uplift the education as well as the wellbeing of our children and youth with different special needs.

At this juncture, allow me to highlight some of these.

As signatory to International conventions including the United National Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Convention on the

Rights of the Child and the Sustainable Development Goal 4, it has been incumbent upon us to live up to a number of our commitments.

Thus, I am pleased to announce that a new Policy Framework and Strategy Document has now been developed for the sector. I believe that some of you were also present in the Stakeholders' Meeting that was organized to validate that Document. One extremely important dimension of the document is its advocacy of a shift from the Social Model to the Rights-Based model of disability for learners with SEN. In line with our commitment to the SDGs, this model views inclusive education for every learner across the entire spectrum of abilities as a right and not a privilege.

Ladies & Gentlemen

In keeping with one of the recommendations of the Policy Framework and Strategy Document, the Ministry is currently working on the setting up of a Special Education Needs Authority. Government is providing its total backing as would have been evidenced by the allocation of Rs 10M in the 2018/19 budget for the setting up of the Special Education Needs Authority. This Authority will ensure, *inter-alia*, the regulation, monitoring and facilitation of the implementation of Special Education Needs policies. It will also harmonise and promote programmes and policies for the Education and development of Learners with SEN.

For this purpose, the Ministry is coming up with the SEN Authority Bill to be introduced in the National Assembly very soon.

Ladies & Gentlemen

Let it be stated loud and clear: I have at heart the education of learners with Special Education Needs. In fact, during the last two years, my Ministry has spared no efforts to uplift the well-being of learners with SEN.

You will appreciate that, as a Ministry, obviously, we have a responsibility towards the SEN sector **AS A WHOLE** and our policies have to be so shaped as to cater for it as an entire entity.

One illustration is obviously the grant in-aid which Government pays to NGOs. In fact, in the budget 2016/17, the Grant-in-aid payable to NGOs running SEN

schools was increased by 50%, that is, from Rs 60M to Rs 90M and, thereafter, it was further increased by 30 %, that is, from Rs 90M to Rs 115.2M in the year 2017/2018. It is noteworthy that, in May this year, Government has further increased the grant-in-aid so that the item pertaining to the “Contribution to salary” was increased to be in accordance with the minimum wage policy for all staff servicing SEN schools.

To cap it all, for this Financial Year, provision has again been made for all other items to be further increased, whereby by the end of this month, a revised Grant-in-Aid formula, with three items namely, Teaching Aids, Utilities and Furniture and Equipment will be increased fourfold, that is, from Rs 1,300 to Rs 5,200.

Ladies & Gentlemen

I mentioned earlier that the Ministry came up with a new Strategy Document which views inclusive education for every learner across the entire spectrum of abilities as a right and not a privilege. In this context, it is more than paramount to create an environment that is conducive to facilitating learning for all and to have settings that are commensurate with individual learning needs. This explains the adaptation last year of the infrastructure of 16 secondary schools has been adapted to make them more accessible to learners with special needs. For this year, this project will be extended to some 20 additional schools.

Ladies & Gentlemen

There are other children and youth with special educational needs who need to be supported differently. Again, this is part of their right to the same quality of education and life. Some of them have been facing the hurdle of access. Accordingly, free taxi fares which were exclusively reserved for those pursuing tertiary education, have been extended to learners with SEN attending the primary as well as the secondary schools.

I must here also remind you that, as part of the equity drive, a scholarship scheme for learners with disabilities was introduced with effect from January 2017. Up to now seven students with SEN have benefited from this new scholarship, to pursue Post-Secondary/Tertiary studies. They are also benefitting from a stipend of Rs 5,000 monthly.

Ladies & Gentlemen

The aim of my Ministry is to facilitate, develop, educate and provide life-skills to all learners of the Republic of Mauritius such that, whilst leaving school, they will be independent and self-reliant and contribute towards the country's development and prosperity.

Time and again, I have had the opportunity of emphasising that the Ministry cannot go at it alone.

Thus we have always sought the participation of NGOs with whom we have established collaborative ventures to ensure that the various objectives set for the sector are achieved.

In this context, I wish to place on record my appreciation for the laudable partnership with the Society for the Welfare of the Deaf for the running of an Integrated Unit at D. Hurry Government School. I am fully confident that the Ministry will continue to work on such other fruitful collaborative ventures for the promotion of an inclusive education system focused on the holistic development of learners.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We should continue to militate for the rights of the deaf; we should continue to engage in policies and activities and initiatives in favour of the deaf. We should have more qualified interpreters, more bespoke training for the staff and personnel and more resource centers.

But we must also consider the **preventive measures**, including awareness campaigns that we should resort to mitigate the risks of deafness.

Ladies & Gentlemen,

Let me conclude by asserting my appreciation for the **Association**, for the arduous support given to learners with hearing impairment-- not only to those attending the school here but to the deaf community at large. I am given to understand that the Association also provides hearing aids to all the hearing impaired people of the Republic of Mauritius, who are referred to them. Well done!

Let me also reiterate my reassurance that the Ministry will always support your organization and this school that caters for learners from pre-primary, primary, secondary as well as for the technical and vocational studies.

I wish **the Society for the Welfare of the Deaf** plenty of success in all its future endeavours.

Thank you.