



STATEMENT

TO HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

By Honourable Fayval Williams

Minister of Education, Youth and Information

October 6, 2020

Madame Speaker,

Madame Speaker, yesterday Oct 5 was the first day of the new school term for 2020/2021. I take this opportunity to provide this Honourable House with an update on the official reopening of schools.

So Madame Speaker, I gave a national broadcast on Sunday night ahead of schools reopening to welcome back students and teachers to the remote environment and encourage them to soldier on using the three approaches that the Ministry outlined.

Madame Speaker, our public schools began classes with students remaining at home and receiving the teaching and learning experience in a number of different approaches (online, by audio/visual means utilizing the TV, cable network and radio), and the Ministry's Learning Kit with their textbooks and worksheets.

While our students were eager to engage again with the formal educational system, we directed our schools to make the priority for yesterday, today and tomorrow the psychosocial support for our children. Schools were directed not to rush back into the subject lessons right away on day one. We asked principals and teachers to develop psychosocial sessions to ensure that the students are in the right state of mind.

On television, on the Ministry's eHome network, our guidance and counselling teams had devotion and psychosocial sessions in recognition that our students have been out of school for more than six months as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and during this time would have been affected by the lack of interactions with their peers and teachers. They would have been impacted by the changes in their routines. Some of our children would have lost family members. Some may have had to be relocated from their familiar surroundings. Some might have witnessed violence in their communities and had other disruptions in their families. The psychosocial sessions are meant to address the children's mental health and wellbeing, improve their capacity to cope with the emotional challenges and help to mitigate the impact of the stressors in their environment.

Madame Speaker, according to research, "Families should know that distressed children may regress in behaviour, particularly at younger ages. Older children may revert to play from a younger age, resume an old habit such as thumb sucking or rocking, or

become more dependent and fearful of separation from the parents or caregivers. Adolescents can be particularly vulnerable when the gradual gaining of independence from the family is disrupted."

Given that a large majority of our children are not in the school environment in which teachers and guidance counselors would have been able to spot these changes, parents and guardians have to be vigilant on an hour by hour basis to these subtle changes in their children and seek the help from the guidance counsellors at the school level. Clinical service providers are also available to provide counselling, psychosocial and empowerment sessions for the students, staff and parents.

Tele-counselling will continue in collaboration with The Child Guidance Clinic, supported by UNICEF. Students who were referred to the Child Guidance Clinic will continue to benefit from ongoing counselling though not in school.

Thirty five (35) psychosocial helplines for parents are available across all seven (7) Regions through the efforts of the National Parenting Support Commission in collaboration with UNICEF, Victoria Mutual Foundation and Fight for Peace.

Madame Speaker, we are happy to report that for the **Online** approach through the Google Learning Management System (LMS), some 352,816 students and teachers are on boarded with their access

codes to receive the teaching and learning experience. That figure Madame Speaker, exceeded our wildest expectations. It tells us that our students are capable of being a part of the technology wave that will revolutionize this digital education product and the education sector.

Despite the heavy rains yesterday that created some power outages and disrupted internet connectivity in some areas. Despite the frustrations with the telecom providers and the lack of connectivity in many of our communities, students and teachers were not daunted.

A teacher from Maryland Primary (Hanover, Region 4) sent us a pic of her working online from her classroom with the screen on the wall and pictures of her students arrayed on the screen. We got screen shots from Maldon Primary of orientation sessions. Kellits Primary sent us their welcome video and so too Boundbrook Infant School. We got pictures of the virtual engagement in full swing at Alston Primary. We heard from Beulah Primary about their psychosocial session. Mount Carmel primary sent us their video. We saw pictures of Grade three students logging on at Coffee Piece primary. Madame Speaker, there were many more whatsapps.

We got voice notes from parents. If you will indulge me, here is a 40 second voice note from a parent of Denbigh High to the principal.

Schedules for all the platforms through which lessons would be available were published widely in addition to being sent to schools for distribution.

Tablet Distribution

Madame Speaker, I just want to congratulate eLearning for a swift start to the distribution of tablets. I announced in Parliament last Tuesday, that distribution would start on Oct 2nd and it did. The first allocation of 146 tablets were distributed to The Holy Family Primary and Infant School, situated in the community of Parade Gardens which is located in the parish of Kingston in the constituency of Central Kingston. The Community is bounded by Rose Gardens in the North, Rae Town to the East, the Caribbean Sea in the South and Central Downtown to the West.

On Sunday, yes Madame Speaker, Sunday, the team from the Ministry and eLearning were at Browns Town Primary and Alva Infant and Primary both in St. Ann to ensure the roll out of tablets continued. Our goal as a Ministry and as a Jamaica Labor Party led Government is to not stop until we have a laptop or tablet in the hands of every child in Jamaica. This is a big audacious goal but we must do it. We will do it. We are on an irreversible technology path. Even if we go back to face-to-face tomorrow, having technology in the hands of our children, our students and in classrooms cannot be interrupted or stopped. Digital education, the innovative use of digital tools and technologies during teaching and learning, is irreversible and all, not some, all our children, all of our children must have access to these digital tools and technologies. This Government will ensure that happens.

Madame Speaker, I am pleased to say that based on the updated figures I received today, every student on PATH in Grades 4,5,6 will be able to get a tablet from this current distribution of the 40,000 tablets.

The third approach is for the Ministry to provide learning kits for students to utilise along with their textbooks and worksheets at home.

Madame Speaker, my heart swelled with pride. I saw pics of teachers who loaded up their cars with books so that they could deliver those books to students in rural Jamaica.

The calls came in from all over Jamaica from volunteers who want to help to distribute the learning material to our students.

Shortly, we will officially launch our “One Laptop or Tablet per child” We are seeing corporate Jamaica rally to the call already. These include the Musson Group who, on its own initiative has put in place a programme to help their employees buy a laptop or tablet for their child. The Sandals Group is on board. Manpower Maintenance Services, Premix, Digicel, New Fortress Energy and only this morning Nationwide News Network began its appeal. There are vendors who have come on board to offer payment plans for those parents who cannot afford the full upfront cost of the device. Madame Speaker, Jamaicans are committing themselves to ensure our children succeed.

Madame Speaker, let me remind parents that our hotlines numbers are up and working

888-338-2283 (888-edu-cate)

888-724-8463 (888-sch-time)

Our Call Center, that was created last week, is now up and working as is responding to calls.

Our email address, educate@educate.gov.jm created specifically for back to school queries is up and working

Our Back to School Website/Landing Page is now live. This is educate.gov.jm. This page directs parents, teachers and students to the relevant documents and resources for online/distant learning.

I would like to acknowledge Minister Morgan for his work in guiding the communications team to raise the bar on the communication from the Ministry to our stakeholders and also allow greater communication access to the Ministry.

Madame Speaker, let me ask and answer the following question.

Was the first day a perfect day? No. Our independent schools are hurting financially. They have some unique challenges to which our Ministry must respond. Many of our independent schools serve many special needs children for whom the three (3) approaches we

outlined are not ideal. Others would have invested heavily in significantly improving the safety of their environment for face-to-face classes. These independent schools exist and find ways to keep themselves going financially as a result of decisions and choices that parents make to fund the tuition and so these schools do not make a call on the Government's purse. We could learn from those who opened their doors on September 7 and remained open in a very safe way, in many cases transporting the students without access.

Even as our public school students remain at home until such time as the JTA, the Principal Association of Secondary Schools and the National Parent Teachers Association of Jamaica are comfortable in allowing our children the face-to-face instruction, we must find ways to accommodate the diversity of schools that exists in our education sector.

Over the next days, the MOEYI and MOHW will be having consultations with our diverse group of schools to look at their unique situations and ensure there are strong Disaster Risk Management protocols in action every day, that parents understand their responsibilities and the uncertainties of the pandemic.

Madame Speaker, the resilience of our students, parents, teachers and administrators has demonstrated that with unity of purpose, a vision for success and a commitment to the best interest of our children that despite our challenges we can continue to make significant improvements in their education even in a pandemic.

The current pandemic is an opportunity for all of us to come together as a parliament, as a people to ensure that we secure the fate of our future generation. We ask Jamaicans to have faith in our efforts and our sincerity and know that this administration is passionately committed to the development of our young people in our education sector.

We call on all Jamaicans (private sector, public sector, citizens) to stand together to help where you can by donating tablets or laptops or data-plans.

Motivate where you can by encouraging our students to remain focused.

Participate where you can in the education of your children.

Now is the time for all parents, caregiver, guardians to redouble your efforts in working with our children for their success.

This Parliament stands with you.

This Government stands with you.

This Ministry stands with you.

This Minister stands with you for the sake of our children.

Thank you, Madame Speaker