

MATCH AGAINST DELIVERY

Statement by Hon. Rev. Ronald Thwaites, Minister of Education At Breakfast for Senior Journalists, January 16, 2014

Good morning ladies and gentlemen of the media.

Let me extend on behalf of the Ministry of Education best wishes for the New Year.

Fifteen years ago, at the start of the millennium, the country set itself the goals that every boy and girl at grade four in school should be fully literate and numerate (be able to read and write and do arithmetic) by this year.

Literacy and numeracy levels were, therefore, established as markers for national development.

The specific goals were that 85% of students in the grade-four age cohort must achieve mastery of literacy and numeracy skills by 2015. Please note that when we account for the 15% of students who suffer from learning disabilities, 85 % translate to 100 % of the **educable** cohort.

For many years the Ministry of Education has been using the Grade Four Literacy Test (GFLT) and the Grade Four Numeracy Test (GFNT) to measure student achievement in these areas.

ACHIEVEMENT IN LITERACY

What has been the achievement in literacy?

At the 2014 sitting of the Grade Four Literacy Test 77.4 % of the age cohort achieved mastery of literacy. This represents a 30-percentage point increase for the ten-year period 2004 to 2014, moving from 57%. Although the average increase has been 3% per year, some schools have recorded improvement at faster rates.

When we break down last year's test results we find that 86.4 % of our girls are already mastering literacy, while only 68.6 % of our boys have attained mastery. The country is now 7.6 percentage points away from reaching the Millennium Development goal. The final measurement will be made at this year's sitting of the Grade Four Literacy Test in summer.

SPECIAL FOCUS ON BOYS

The Ministry of Education has identified word recognition, writing tasks and reading comprehension – the latter being the weakest area – as the areas in which the boys are underperforming. Measures inclusive of extra periods on the time table, extra classes during the days and the provision of additional resource materials to the schools are being implemented to address the deficit. Additionally, we are implementing project-based types of activities that will stimulate the boys' learning, thereby allowing them to grasp the concepts being taught.

This improvement in literacy has been the result of the combined efforts of the Ministry's National Literacy Team and dedicated teachers. In addition, the country is indebted to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) for its support in improving literacy outcomes.

Currently, USAID is assisting the Ministry to provide direct support to 420 primary schools through the deployment of 66 Reading Coaches across the island to work with approximately seven schools each. The coaches give special support to teachers at grades 1-3 level. (See additional information in press kit).

NUMERACY TARGETS

How has the country fared in achieving the Millennium Goal in the area of numeracy? Fifty-eight per cent (58%) of students who sat the Grade Four Numeracy Test last year attained mastery, registering a marginal decline of 1.4% over the previous year. But there has been a 20-percentage point improvement for the past five years, moving from a low 38 per cent in 2010.

An analysis of the performance of students on the subtests indicates that there was a significant increase of twenty four per cent (24%) in the mastery rate on the Algebra and Statistics sub-tests.

There was a decline of twelve percentage points (12%) in the mastery of the Number Representation & Number Operation Component and a decline of approximately nine percentage points (9%) in the Measurement and Geometry components. This accounts for the decline seen in the overall mastery rate nationally.

Recognising that the goal is a significant distant away, the Ministry has set a revised target of 85% mastery of numeracy by 2018.

IMPROVEMENT MEASURES

1. A thorough analysis was done of students' responses on the 2013 and 2014 tests and the information gathered has been noted and is being used to develop training sessions for principals and teachers of Grades 3 and 4. The sessions are designed to help participants address the common misconceptions and conceptual gaps which have been noted.
2. Continued deployment of fifty five (55) mathematics specialists to provide support to ninety (90) under performing primary schools. An additional three specialists will be engaged within the next three weeks allowing the Ministry to provide support to an additional 15 schools.
3. Procurement of on-line learning resources to strengthen the content knowledge of teachers. More than four thousand (4,000) primary

teachers should have access to this resource before the end of the current school year.

4. Promoting an approach to the teaching and learning of mathematics which is focused on promoting the development of conceptual understanding, computational fluency and problem-solving.
5. Targeted support to large critical primary schools whose average mastery levels over the past four sittings of the GFNT have been less than fifty per cent (50%). An additional 100 of these will receive mathematics coaches in the 2015 /2016 School Year. The schools will also be given support in the implementation of the School Based Mathematics Teacher Model, with teachers receiving additional training and support using a hybrid approach of electronic- based and face to face interventions.
6. Expansion of the mathematics web page linked to the Ministry's official website. This page provides teachers access to sources, sample lesson plans and will direct parents and principals towards resources which will assist them to support students in attaining numeracy.
7. Making model lessons available to teachers through free-to-air television.
8. Monitoring of mathematics improvement initiatives outlined in School Improvement Plans by Regional Mathematics Committees. Regional Committees will report to the National Mathematics Advisory Committee which will be responsible for monitoring implementation of the National Mathematics Strategic Plan and the National Mathematics Policy Guidelines.

For the sitting of grade four literacy and numeracy test 2015, the date has been changed from June 4 and 5 to June 30 and July 1, 2015. This is to ensure that the lost time in September and October because of Chikunguna can be made up for.

CONCLUSION

Using literacy as a benchmark for development, the Ministry of Education is pleased at the progress that the country has made so far. We note that competence in numeracy and mathematical skills is necessary for people to understand and benefit from important information that is around them.

We commit our self to doing better, especially as it relates to improving teaching and learning among children with special needs. Last year the Ministry completed an island-wide survey and identified 6,500 students with special needs.

We also have assigned Special Needs resource persons (seven in total) to each region to assist schools in developing effective teaching and learning strategies for students with less severe mental disabilities.

Thank you.