



26 June 2020

Statement from the Hon. Julianna O'Connor-Connolly, Minister for EYSAL

RE: An update on education amidst COVID 19 Pandemic

Good Afternoon Everyone.

Happy Anniversary to Mr. & Mrs. Randal. Happy Birthday Pastor Audley Scott.

It goes without saying that the Cayman Islands along with the rest of world, have experiences, and in some cases, continue to experience the negative effects of the COVID- 19 pandemic, and I dare say will continue to do some for some time yet.

Our citizens have had to adapt to drastic life changes that have arisen as a result of this global disaster. Each day we still discover new unprecedented challenges that have arisen as a result of the pandemic. Foremost in our minds has been survival and our Government's priority has been and continues to be, the health and safety of all our residents.

Acknowledging the outstanding work of our Government and ably led by the Hon. Premier cooperation of our citizens to control and suppress widespread transmission of the virus, we embark upon the next stages in our journey to restore all sectors of society. This includes efforts to address the residual effects experienced in all other areas of society. In the education sector, our students remain our most important stakeholders. Our education professionals,, have demonstrated an unwavering commitment to providing education to our students despite the odds and I want to publicly acknowledge and thank our educators for their unrelenting efforts, even in the face of a global pandemic, inoperative. This was not the case for the education system for these Cayman Islands.

Following the practice of global benchmarking to measure performance, it is reported that England's current student engagement measured at 23%, whilst our local education system is at 87.8%. This achievement is a testament of the values and principles of our Country.

In fact, while we as a community all strive to provide solutions to restore the economy of these beloved Cayman Islands, we must all remember to appreciate the work of educators who are undeniably essential workers.

In this statement I will endeavor to provide an update on the education system in summary and categorized by topical issues, relative to the pandemic and our responses in this regard;

Governance and Leadership

Throughout the pandemic, health and safety of students have been a key priority for the Ministry, the Department of Education Services (DES) and Schools. The Ministry of Education, the Department of Education Services have worked diligently on the delivery of distance learning solutions tailored to each individual student need, in addition to provision of regular meals, care packets and other health and wellness support. This included but not limited to;

- Providing online education across all schools to approx. 5020 students
- Packaged and provided of an additional 6000 printed schoolwork packets to students in need of printed course materials
- In addition to schoolwork packets, provided 3000 personal care packets (an examples of the type of items included are school supplies, hygiene items, treats, gifts where applicable)
- Provided 655 laptops on loan to students with a proven identified need and prioritizing examination year students
- Providing and facilitating free school meals to over 600 students daily
- Providing weekly student counselling sessions and wellness checks via one-to-one, small groups, and full class sessions
- Providing weekly staff counselling sessions

- Developing and delivering innovative virtual events to encourage social interaction including but not limited to; parent wellness sessions, talent shows, school assemblies and school leaving ceremonies

The Ministry of Education has drafted and/or issued a range of guidance documents and policies for education institutions that focus on the following:

- Pre-Pandemic Plan on School Closures and Learning Provision
- Continuity of Education Policy Guidance for Schools
- Distance Learning Guidance
- Guidance on Transition from Primary to Secondary (+Year 12 Pathways)
- Snapshot of Education Provision (Monitoring Document)
- Education Recovery Plan for the Reopening of Schools (Individual School Plans)
- Guidance for the Reopening of Schools

Several new cross-agency, multi-disciplinary partnerships have developed and are in place in responding to students' needs throughout the pandemic. Prior to and throughout the pandemic the Ministry of Education, the Department of Education Services and Schools have been in close contact with a range of Government and private sector partners. This has included, but not been limited to, the Ministry of Community Affairs, the Department of Children and Family Services, and the MASH unit. Student health and welfare has been of critical importance, and close partnerships with these agencies have been essential throughout the pandemic. We have also partnered with a range of charities to provide meals and care packets to students and families. Also, we have established partnerships to provide internet access for students and teachers, transportation from the airport to isolation facilities, counselling support for students and staff and to provide a laptop for every single student in our government schools in a new "one-to-one" laptop initiative. We will also consider the possibility of doing a similar computer programme for UCCI.

A one-time grant has been established to support private schools that have been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. All private schools was sent the application information and have the opportunity to apply for funding to the Private School Grant Committee chaired by Mr. Dan

Scott, who will review all applications accordingly and provide funding based on the schools ability to satisfy the criteria.

Recognizing the negative residual effects of the pandemic in the lives our nations brightest minds, our ministry sought and received Cabinet's approval for a temporary relaxation of scholarship requirements to allow scholarship recipients whose studies may have been affected by the COVID 19 virus and suspended from scholarship funding to continue to receive funding under Government's scholarship program in line with the recommendations of the Education Council.

Further in April's press Conference, I called for an inspection of schools by the Office of Education Standards (OES), to assess home learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. As minister, I wanted to have schools tested during this time to identify areas of both weaknesses and strengths in our school's responses to, during a time of a pandemic of this nature. Additionally, I was confident that the report would reveal the underlying modus operandi that is, that equal access to education was a priority. The report addresses the following 12 areas/topics:

1. Development of a comprehensive educational digital strategy to promote high quality learning more effectively at home as well as at school
2. Enhancement of teachers' knowledge and skills relating to digital learning platforms
3. Provision of a manageable range of digital platforms for distance learning
4. Internet connectivity provision to facilitate effective home learning
5. Enhancement of the provision for information technology in all government schools
6. Minimum expectations set for online, face-to-face ('synchronous') teaching
7. Assistance by DES in monitoring the quality of students' online learning
8. Processes to monitor and track attendance during on-line sessions stages of education
9. Assessment arrangements for identifying and understanding student learning gaps
10. Ministry direction for best-practice plans to address student learning gaps
11. Strengthening of cross agency, multi-disciplinary partnerships
12. Reopening plans of schools to ensure health and safety of students and staff

To access the Ministry's detailed responses to each of the report's recommendations, please visit www.gov.ky/coronavirus-education for the June 12th release.

Making Up for Learning Loss

Addressing potential learning loss and securing education for all of our students is an absolute priority. This is also being coupled with a heightened focus on students' mental health and well-being as we support them physically returning to school. We want our students to come back to a welcoming school environment and ready to learn. Still, we also recognize the trauma they may have experienced as a result of the pandemic, and we need to fully support them carefully.

The Ministry of Education, together with the Department of Education Services, developed policy guidance to track student progress and attendance throughout the pandemic. Understanding any gaps in learning is essential in planning for the upcoming school year. Schools have tracked student progress and achievement in order to identify learning gaps and provide responsive instruction. Students will also be assessed upon their return to school (at the end of August) to determine learning needs and for schools to implement interventions and determined catch-up provision. These assessments include, but are not limited to 'Read, Write Inc. Progress Test in English, Progress Test in Math's, Progress Test in Science and Pupils' Attitudes to Self and School'. A careful balance has to be found with assessing students while being mindful of their mental health and wellness as a result of the pandemic.

In addition, the Ministry developed an Education Recovery Plan Template for use by all schools (private and public) to document their plans to address learning loss, professional development, curriculum restructuring, assessment, and mental health support for students and staff. Additional guidance has been provided by the Ministry of Education with research-based practices (regional and international) to address learning loss.

The Department of Education team, in consultation with principals, have also reviewed and adjusted the curriculum to place further emphasis on the core subject areas of English,

mathematics and science. Special attention is also being placed on students who will sit exams at the end of the 2020-2021 academic year to ensure they have the best chance of success. These Education Recovery Plans are due today.

It should be noted that students had completed approximately 75% of the school year when the switch was made to distance learning.

Examinations

At both the primary and secondary level and assessment is ongoing after each topic/module.

- Key Stage 1, 2 and 3 will have progress assessed from continuous assessment
- Reporting on progress for Key stages 1, 2 and 3 will be done via email and Everest platform. Parents will be notified of the distribution of reports
- Key Stage 4 will have external examinations
- Key stage 4 examination results distribution will be either in-person or electronically depending on the status of COVID-19 in the Cayman Islands

In March 2020, the various UK Examination Boards announced the cancellation of the June 2020 examinations series at centers in all jurisdictions. This decision became necessary in order to ensure the protection and the safety of candidates and teachers considering the global COVID-19 pandemic. As an alternative to the writing of examinations, centers are required to make evidence-based decisions about the grades for candidates in each subject.

Other examining boards such as Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) and Institute of the Motor Industry (IMI) have opted to continue with their external verification and quality assurance procedures. Site visits have been replaced with a remote sampling process.

The Caribbean Examinations Council has taken a different approach. The Council opted to continue with the administration of its examinations using a modified examinations' process.

The number of examination papers per subject was reduced to the minimum necessary to provide valid assessed grades and other specific changes.

Plans for the administration of secondary external exams during Covid-19 have been developed and are currently in review.

School Reopening Plans

The Ministry has developed and issued detailed 'Guidance for the Reopening of Schools and Early Childhood Care and Education Centres' which outlines all the recommendations listed.

The guidance includes, but is not limited to:

- Physical distancing
- Phased return to schools
- Safety protocols (personal respiratory hygiene)
- Enhanced cleaning and sanitising protocols
- Shift break, lunches, and playtimes to ensure physical distancing
- Pick up and drop off protocols
- Protocols for buses

Additionally, specific planning is underway to address student mental health and wellness when students physically return to schools. Students and their families have experienced trauma throughout the pandemic, and this needs to be addressed before learning can take place effectively.

Government school reopening dates are as follows:

- August 25 – all new students report for new student orientation

- The orientation on the 25 August may be done remotely or in person (it is yet to be decided). Although some students may attend orientation on the 25 August, their in-person classes may not resume until September
- August 26
 - All Nursery, reception, Years 1, 2, 6, 7, 10, 11 report to school for in-person lessons
 - Creek & Spot Bay Primary will determine at a later date whether additional students will be allowed to resume classes on that day.
 - CIFEC will also welcome its Year 12 students.
 - Students in Years 3, 4, 5, 8, 9 will resume online lessons
- September 9 – Students moving into Years 3, 4, and 5 for primary schools will return to school and Years 8, 9 for secondary schools will return.
- All schools will be open for classes on this day.

The 2020 to 2021 academic calendar is now available online at www.education.gov.ky

In closing, I would like to add that we have an incredible team of education professionals who are committed to providing the best services to our students and I would like to publicly thank all of the amazing staff of our Government schools system, including Ministry staff, DES staff, teachers, teaching assistants, counsellors, coaches, administrators, bus drivers, wardens, canteen workers and security guards who are continuing to show up for our students in miraculous form. We must not forget that school staff are also parents and caregivers of their own families, are still expected to deal with the effects of this pandemic, whilst also counterbalancing their own personal commitments with still having to deliver best-practice learning solutions to students of whom they are tutors, counsellors, confidants and extended family members of. I say thank you and ‘a God bless you’ to all our education professionals and acknowledge that you are indeed essential workers.

To parents and guardians, I also rightfully acknowledge the part that you all are playing as you provide home learning support to your children during this remote learning period. You have the Governments full support. We understand the challenges you also face and are doing everything we can to support you and your child’s needs. I encourage you to continue to work

collaboratively with your child's teachers and school staff. More importantly, to recognize and honestly reflect upon the work it truly takes to educate a child. Further, to continue to remain as involved in the educational journey of your children once we overcome this pandemic. Because we are a resilient people and we will overcome this with the grace of God. Do not waiver, do not lose faith, trust in God and we will overcome Cayman Islands. We are in this together.