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Ministry Response to the Office of Education Standards (OES) Inspection Report on Home Learning During COVID-19 for Government Schools

The Ministry of Education, Youth, Sports, Agriculture and Lands (MEYSAL) implemented protocols for school closures and distance learning prior to the closure of schools on 24 March 2020. As a result, all government schools issued learning or activity packets to students to commence distance learning. Throughout the pandemic, **health and safety of students have been a key priority** for the Ministry, the Department of Education Services (DES) and Schools. Evidence shows that children's learning may be significantly impacted if they are hungry, feel insecure or unsafe. This pandemic, and its multiple effects on the health, income and well-being of individuals and communities, put a strain on the psychological reserves of all, including students and parents/guardians. The education system provided:

access to counsellors, educational psychologists, special-needs teachers/specialists, or other personnel for students with physical and mental/emotional needs

meals for approximately 600 students each day, in partnership with the Department of Children and Family Services, charities and the private sector

3000 care packets and other supplies to students and families

innovative virtual events to encourage social interaction including but not limited to: parent wellness sessions, field trips, talent shows, school assemblies and school-leaving ceremonies

It should be noted that the number of students requiring free nutritional services (free schools meals) increased throughout the pandemic as some parents/guardians were newly unemployed or struggling, for other reasons, to provide nutritious meals for their families.

The Ministry thanks all educators, parents and students for the teamwork and commitment that they have displayed amid this time of uncertainty, and will remain resolute in its efforts to provide the children of the Cayman Islands with the best educational opportunities.

Update on Progress in Education

OES Recommendation 1. The Ministry of Education, in collaboration with wider government departments, should develop a comprehensive educational digital strategy to promote high quality learning for all students in government schools incorporating regular opportunities for students to learn more effectively at home as well as at school.

At the start of the pandemic, the Ministry of Education developed several school closure protocols and all government schools issued learning or activity packets to students to commence distance learning. During the first few days of the school closure, school leaders also launched online learning provisions to supplement the learning packets. The Department of Education Services surveyed parents/guardians to gauge their access to the internet and digital devices (laptops, tablets, etc.) From these results, it was determined that many families did not have internet access or had a slower connection due to the number of persons in the household requiring internet access for work or school. It was also determined that several families did not have a digital device or that the devices had to be shared between multiple members of the family. Based on this information, the decision was taken to continue with paper/activity-based resources as well as online resources.

A switch to solely online provision would have severely disadvantaged students, especially those from more vulnerable circumstances.

Parents/guardians struggled during the pandemic for a number of reasons and have expressed difficulty supporting their children with school work, while also having to work from home or manage a range of other hardships or responsibilities. There is a need to balance the educational provision with the understanding of the strains and hardships being experienced by families in this very difficult time. Mental health for students, teachers and family members continues to be a priority area of focus for the Ministry of Education, the Department of Education Services and Schools. It should also be recognised that learning is taking place in the home, which is an entirely

different setting than a classroom. In many cases, students struggle to find quiet places for learning as multiple siblings and parents also have to engage in online learning or remote work at the same time.

Research shows that distance learning can be achieved effectively through a range of means to meet students' needs. The goal is to have all students make progress rather than to standardise the way this is done despite the different conditions.

OES Recommendation 2. Teachers' knowledge and skills should be enhanced through ongoing professional development opportunities that relate to the agreed learning platforms to be used schools.

Ongoing professional development, including ICT support, is provided to teachers throughout the academic year. Providing system-wide professional development proved difficult due to the over 700 educators that would have required such training amid the pandemic. Instead, schools provided support to teachers on an as-needed basis. Schools continued to utilise the online platforms that teachers and students were most familiar with to reduce the need for training. We did not want to add the additional challenge of having to learn a new system while delivering online learning. Currently, the ICT Team and Specialists are identifying additional training needs and guidance for the upcoming school year.

OES Recommendation 3. The Ministry of Education should agree and resource an appropriate and manageable range of platforms to be used at different stages of education.

Schools opted to utilise the range of platforms that were in use prior to the pandemic to reduce the number of training sessions that would be required for staff to learn an entirely new programme or programmes. This reduced the need for professional development and trial and error. To reduce learning loss, it was critical to avoid switching platforms and to mandate new platforms which would have slowed down students' access to education. In addition, not all students had internet access or reliable internet access and therefore needed paper-based or activity-based lessons. It is recognised that the over 700 education professionals have varying ICT

competency levels and the ICT Team and Specialists are identifying additional training needs and guidance for the upcoming school year.

OES Recommendation 4. In implementing a revised digital strategy, there is a need to improve wireless connectivity and bandwidth provision across the Cayman Islands to facilitate effective home learning. As a priority, all upper primary and secondary students should have regular access to an appropriate, designated 'Bring Your Own' device to support their school-based and home learning.

The Ministry and DES Teams have liaised with various internet providers to help to increase access to the internet. The Department of Education Services surveyed parents/guardians to gauge their access to the internet and digital devices (laptops, tablets, etc.) From these results, it was determined that many families did not have internet access or had a slower connection due to the number of persons in the household requiring internet access for work or school. It was also determined that several families did not have a digital device or that the devices had to be shared between multiple members of the family. Based on this information, the decision was taken to continue with paper/activity-based resources as well as online resources. A switch to solely online provision would have severely disadvantaged students, especially those from more vulnerable circumstances.

In addition, to the over 500 laptops or digital devices that have been sourced for students during the pandemic, the Ministry is seeking to introduce a programme that would provide each student with a digital device. This request is currently before Cabinet for consideration.

OES Recommendation 5. Principals and relevant staff from the Ministry of Education and the Department of Education Services should further enhance the provision for information technology in all government schools to add new technology and improve connectivity ensuring equality of opportunity for all students.

There is an extensive list of ICT resources that are provided to every school. The Ministry or principals have no control/authority over internet access in homes; however, our teams have worked with internet providers to increase access to students and staff. It should also be noted that

attempting to set up internet access in persons' homes during the pandemic and stay-at-home order would have put families and private sector personnel at risk. It is important to remember the safety requirements as a result of the pandemic.

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All the devices were imaged and had the necessary safety protocols installed prior to being issued to students.

OES Recommendation 6. All school leaders should agree to minimum expectations in terms of online, face-to-face ('synchronous') teaching at different stages of education and monitor implementation on a regular basis.

Minimum expectations were set for all learning (digital or paper/activity-based). The Ministry, DES and Schools were also aware that expectations for students went far beyond teaching and learning. Students were not only learning from their homes but were doing so during a pandemic with numerous strains on resources. Families were supporting their children during this time while also working from home themselves or managing additional stressors such as unemployment or illness. Setting standards and expectations had to be balanced with principals' knowledge of the hardships being experienced by students, families, and staff as a result of the pandemic. Several families (including teachers) lost family members overseas, lost jobs, were ill and were struggling with mental health issues. Counsellors and other support staff were deployed (through a range of means) to offer support.

School principals and senior management staff regularly monitored lessons and planning. They engaged with students themselves and were critical to the meal delivery programme. Regular data and situational tracking was conducted weekly and reported to the DES and Ministry as part of the Continuity of Education Plans issued by the Ministry. Issues with attendance, teaching and learning, health and welfare were addressed very quickly, and cross-agency or cross-ministerial

support was provided as needed. The regular monitoring and support protocols that were in place also provided opportunities for innovative and solution-focused practices to be shared between schools.

Comparison to England

- Government schools reported on average student engagement percentage of 90+% (over a number of weeks)
- England reported less than 40% of students engaged in online learning during the first few weeks of the pandemic

OES Recommendation 7. Officers from the Department of Education Services should assist school leaders to regularly monitor the quality of students' online learning to maximise improvement and share best practice.

This has been ongoing from the beginning of the pandemic. DES personnel made regular contact with principals and teaching staff to monitor the provision of education, meal delivery services for those in need, care packets to families, mental health support, provision of resources, ICT support, business services support and a range of other support services. In addition, the DES and Ministry team reviewed weekly data reports from schools (private and public) that focused on attendance, student engagement, teacher and student well-being, to name a few. The teams also facilitated the sharing of good practices between schools. Team members also served as part of the National Emergency Operation Centre clusters and volunteered outside of education, for example at the isolation facilities for returning students and residents.

During the first monitoring period, schools were reporting differently on students who were unaccounted for. Some reported students who were accounted for but who were having difficulty engaging in lessons. This issue was quickly addressed to ensure accurate data was provided. The goal was to ensure that all students were accounted for and safe. DES Truancy officers addressed attendance issues. Cross-agency or cross-ministerial support was provided as needed.

External Exams

- Key Stage 4 (high school) students are due to sit their CXC exams in July.
- Schools have placed particular focus on these year groups in order to minimise negative impact. This has included but not been limited to prioritising these students for laptops and digital devices.

OES Recommendation 8. School leaders, in partnership with the relevant government departments, should devise clear processes to monitor and track attendance during on-line sessions and ensure consistency in arrangements to address poor attendance in the context of home learning. It is important that data is accurate and comprehensive in order to inform policy.

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OES Recommendation 9. At the start of the next academic year, assessment arrangements need to be in place to ensure that teachers and school leaders have accurate and comprehensive information regarding students' skills, knowledge and gaps in learning. This information should be used to deliver appropriate school-level 'catch up' provision.

This is already in place. The Ministry of Education, in partnership 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. This process is in place for private and public schools. 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 Maths, 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 a 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. It should be noted that students had completed approximately 75% of the school year when the switch was made to distance learning.

OES Recommendation 10. The Ministry of Education should provide a clear lead and direction to schools in order to devise coherent 'catch-up' plans for 2020-21 and 2021-22. The plans will need to include suitable adaptations to ensure students' health and safety in the school environment when they return to school. Arrangements should be informed by best practice noted in an international context in those countries where students have already returned to schools after lockdown. Strategies to address gaps in learning may include, for example, lengthening the school day for certain ages of students, providing catch-up sessions, additional examination classes or summer school. Lengthening the next two academic years, if possible, may be a necessary consideration.

This is already in place. Addressing 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 recognise the trauma they may have experienced as a result of the pandemic, and we need to support them carefully.

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A range of assessments (e.g. Dora, Adam, Read, Write Inc. Progress Test in English, Progress Test in Maths, Progress Test in Science and Pupils' Attitudes to Self and School) will also be issued at the beginning of the year. They will help teachers understand students' progress and learning needs. A careful balance has to be found with assessing students while being mindful of their mental health and wellness.

Each school is developing an Education Recovery Plan for 2020/2021 addressing the following areas; Curriculum, Health and Well-Being, Professional Development, Remote/Online Learning, Responses to school Inspections/Forensic Audit of learning during COVID-19. 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.

Pandemic Planning and Guidance Documents

The Ministry of Education has drafted 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)
- COVID-19 - Education Recovery Plan for the Reopening of Schools (Individual School Plans)
- Guidance for the Reopening of Schools

OES Recommendation 11. Cross-agency, multi-disciplinary partnerships should be strengthened. Relevant student information needs to be quickly accessible to all appropriate professionals to help address the welfare needs of all students in any given emergency situation.

This is already in place. Several new partnerships have developed 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 help provide laptops for students, internet access for students and teachers, transportation from the airport to isolation facilities, counselling support for students and staff.

OES Recommendation 12. Appropriate modifications to existing school premises are required in advance of the students' return to school, to ensure the health and safety of students, staff and parents. Considerations such as the provision of multiple hand-sanitising stations and signage to reinforce adequate social distancing protocols need to be agreed across all government schools. A heightened regard for supervision at break and lunchtimes when young children would naturally congregate will be needed. Additionally, innovative timetabling solutions may be necessary at an individual school level to minimise social interactions that could put students and staff at risk.

This is already planned. The Ministry has developed '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.