

New beginning for early childhood development [JM]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The Government last week unveiled an ambitious five-year strategic plan to improve the development outcomes of young children, and including the input of all stakeholders in the process.

Parents, early childhood practitioners, health workers, the private sector, NGOs and the Early Childhood Commission (ECC) are all required to play roles in the plan to achieve outcomes, which are being closely monitored by the World Bank which is providing a part of the funding.

But even as the national strategic plan is being rolled out, approximately 1,000 of Jamaica's 3,000 early childhood institutions have not applied for registration with the ECC - a situation that does not sit well with Minister of Education, Andrew Holness.

"We have been very accommodating up to this point, but there is a law, and that law needs to be observed. We are asking them to speed up their rate of applying," he said at a press conference on the plan last Wednesday.

The deadline for institutions - including day care centres, kindergarten departments of preparatory schools, pre-schools, infant schools, and infant departments - to apply for registration with the ECC was February 29. Holness did not threaten action against those who failed to register, but made it clear that those who did would be preferred for government funding.

"When we have a fully rolled out system. The allocation of funds to the schools will depend on our knowledge of the schools. We can only assist those schools we have knowledge of, so it is in their interest to make every effort to get registered," he said.

But interest in being registered still appears high as people continue to trickle into the Commission's offices each week to be registered, ECC chair Professor Maureen Samms-Vaughan revealed.

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Government has high hopes for the strategic plan, which is 22 per cent bankrolled by a US\$15 million performance-linked loan from the World Bank.

Samms-Vaughan explained that under the plan, nine targets are met each year, and meeting the targets determines the release of funds.

"The World Bank gives us a US\$1 million in start-up funds every year, but the majority of the loan funds we get are based on meeting these targets. Every time we meet a target, it is worth to us US\$180,000," she said.

Other funds are coming from organisations such as the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF); the Culture, Health, Arts, Sports and Education (CHASE) Fund; the Jamaica Social Investment Fund (JSIF); the Environmental Foundation of Jamaica (EFJ); and any other source that wants to identify with early childhood development.

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One of the long term challenges Samms-Vaughan anticipates is meeting the internationally accepted ratio of one practitioner to every 10 children in the three to six years age group, as well as the level of training for teachers at this age group.

"We are a little way away from that ratio right now, but we need a plan that will get us there. It's been shown that unless you have the right ratios, the children do not develop as well," she noted.

But a developing country like Jamaica is in powerful company in this regard.

"The United States, with all its money, has a 15-year plan to ensure all its teachers are properly trained," the professor added.

A feature of the strategic plan is a new early childhood curriculum, which is to be implemented on a phased basis starting this year.

Trained teachers and college student teachers are being trained in the new curriculum, and they will in turn train the country's 6,000 practitioners, Samms-Vaughan revealed.

"It is in keeping with international standards where we recognise that in the first few years of life, children don't just need to be changed and fed; they need to have their brains stimulated," she added.

The five objectives to be realised by the strategic plan include:

- . effective parenting education and support;
- . effective preventative health care for zero to six year olds;
- . early and effective screening diagnosis;
- . intervention for at-risk children and households; and
- . safe, learner-centred well-maintained early childhood facilities; in addition to effective curriculum delivery by trained practitioners.

But with all the elaborate plans, the parents must play their role.

"Without parents, the programme doesn't survive. Institutions that have parenting involvement do very well, Samms-Vaughan said.

- reprinted from the Jamaica Observer

Region: Latin America and the Caribbean [2]

Tags: economics [3]

curricula and pedagogy [4]

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<https://childcarecanada.org/category/region/latin-america-and-caribbean> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/economics> [4]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/curricula-and-pedagogy>