

Note of caution ^[1]

Author: staff reporter

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EXCERPTS:

In the rush to make Trinidad and Tobago the first country in the world to achieve universal Early Childhood education by 2015, the government must take care to ensure that quality remains as squarely in focus as quantity.

The Education Ministry has been trumpeting the history-making nature of its Early Childhood expansion programme as it ticks off the number of centres being opened from month to month. While laudable, the ministry should be cautioned by this country's extensive record of infrastructural investment in education without corresponding yield.

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is possibly the single most critical element of the entire education programme as the foundation of the education and socialising experience. With the extended family rapidly becoming a thing of the past and communities under pressures of every kind, early childhood education occupies a vital space.

In an age of galloping urbanisation, parents, especially working mothers, are hard-pressed to provide a safe, caring, nurturing and stimulating environment for their children during the early years of rapid brain development. According to the experts, early childhood education yields higher investment returns than any other level of education because it sets the frame for maximising the overall educational experience.

In addition to preparing children for school and learning, it provides an opportunity for early detection of learning disabilities and other problems with the chance for remedial and supportive interventions.

At a time when the country is paying a high price for youth alienation and anger, breakdown in family and community life, and loss of trust in public institutions, this society needs to get everything it can from this massive investment in giving our children the best foundation it can afford.

Education Minister Dr Tim Gopeesingh has outlined an ambitious programme under which the country's estimated 34,000 pre-schoolers will be brought into this component of the formal education system. It involves a demanding construction agenda and an intensive programme for training 3,600 teachers for centres to come on stream by 2015. If achieved on schedule, the ECCE is sure to be one of the proud boasts of the People's Partnership Government in its campaign for re-election in 2015, assuming there is no early election.

In their rush to tick off campaign promises, politicians are known to prioritise statistics above all, which is why we urge the minister to pay close attention to the qualitative aspects of our children's early education. We should be guided by the experience in the tertiary sector where successive governments, in their rush to lay claim to grand achievements, expanded the tertiary sector and implemented the GATE programme without adequate safeguards against abuse.

As he grapples with the challenges of making the tertiary education sector more accountable in terms of expenditure and quality of output, Tertiary Education Minister Fazal Karim should share the lessons he has learnt with his colleague in the Education Ministry.

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Region: Latin America and the Caribbean ^[2]

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