



**CAYMAN ISLANDS
GOVERNMENT**

Statement to the Legislative Assembly

**First Meeting of the 2015/2016 Session
of the Cayman Islands Legislative Assembly**

By the Honourable Tara Rivers, JP, MLA

Minister of Education, Employment and Gender Affairs

Early Childhood Care and Education Update

Delivered on 27 May 2015

Madame Speaker,

The work undertaken by the Early Childhood Care and Education (“ECCE”) Unit of the Ministry of Education since this Government took office in May 2013 has been led both by the implementation of the Strategic Plan for Education 2012-2017 and by new policy directives and directions of the Government which have been provided to the Ministry in order to address priority areas identified as being in need of particular focus and urgent attention.

Two key priority areas of this Government which directly impacts and has helped to guide the work of the ECCE is: (1) the need to increase our international competitiveness as a jurisdiction and to raise standards in education generally, and in early childhood education in particular; and (2) the need to focus on persons with Special Education Needs or Disabilities.

With respect to increasing international competitiveness and raising standards, over the last two years since taking office, the ECCE has been able to deliver on a number of key initiatives.

Publishing and distribution of the Cayman Islands Early Years Curriculum

Framework (CIEYCF): The final version of the Curriculum was presented to and approved by the Education Council in April 2014 as the national curriculum for early years. The CIEYCF is a guiding document to assist ECCE practitioners when planning developmentally appropriate activities and programmes for children aged 0 – 5 years old. The Cayman Islands Early Years Curriculum Framework is a document which will help the practitioners cater to the needs of each child, and help them develop into life-long learners who can be productive, contributing members of not just our society, but of the global community. A copy of the CIEYCF will be presented to the LA in due course; however, it can be accessed free of charge online at www.education.gov.ky .

Adopting and implementing the Guidelines for Early Childhood Care and

Education Centres: These Guidelines were approved by the Education Council in August 2013. These guidelines were developed by Ministry in consultation with early childhood stakeholders, and are designed to standardise practice for early years children and to raise standards in early years education provision. The Ministry has now completed the first full year cycle of registration and re-registration of ECCE Centres using the approved Guidelines, and already the

Ministry is starting to see a culture shift and good practice taking root among ECCEs.

Another priority area which the Ministry, the Department of Education Services and the Schools are tasked with is the development of holistic strategies and programmes to address the needs of **persons with Special Education Needs and/or Disabilities (“SEN/D”)**. In addition, Cabinet has recently passed and adopted the Cayman Islands Disabilities Policy, which highlights the need to ensure that our children with special needs and/or disabilities are able to access educational and social opportunities as they grow. To this end, the Ministry has taken a proactive approach in anticipation of the Disabilities Policy being adopted. Since August 2014, the ECCE Unit has benefitted from a secondment of an Early Childhood Officer with specific focus and training in special education needs. The Officer has developed policies, procedures alongside other ECCE Officers.

Targeted training for Early Childhood Care and Education Practitioners and Others: During the 2014/15 fiscal year the ECCE Unit has been leading a series of training sessions for early childhood practitioners to raise awareness

of challenges children **with special education needs and/or disabilities** may have and ways in which they can support them to be more successful. The training series included special sessions for the owners and principals/lead teachers in early childhood centres which helped them identify challenges children may have, guidance on how to discuss their concerns with parents, and procedures that should take place within the early childhood centre if a child is identified to need extra support. The ECCE Unit has also facilitated training for Reception teachers, private schools and DCFS on issues related to special needs.

Another important initiative being spearheaded by the Ministry of Education with the support of the Cabinet Office is the development of a **new service model for the Early Intervention Programme**. Providing adapted environments and specialist provision for children with special education needs as early as possible almost always proves to affect the best outcome later in life. This is a cross-Ministerial approach to address the needs of our youngest children with SEN/D, as the needs of these children are often complex, requiring assistance relating to healthcare, education, family support, etc. and often require access to multiple service providers across various Ministries and Departments. This Government is fully supportive of pursuing a holistic approach to addressing

the issues relating to providing the best possible care and support for some of our most vulnerable children.

Cabinet has just recently issued a mandate to the Ministries of Education, Health, Community Affairs and Planning to come together to develop a multi-agency/multi-ministry approach to address the issues related to the Early Intervention Programme service delivery model which services the needs of our youngest (pre-compulsory aged) special needs students. The staff of the various Ministries and Departments will now need to look at and develop an effective inter-ministerial/inter-departmental model of Early Intervention service delivery with the aim to begin implementing some aspects of the new model, to the extent possible, as early as September 2015, with further implementation aimed for September 2016.

Here is a concrete example that this Government is committed to identifying the issues facing some of our youngest learners and to addressing the issues in a strategic way. This approach may require a culture shift in the way some Ministries and Departments operate; however, the Government recognises that it is important to break down the silos that exist, moving beyond the

individualised domain of each Ministry outputs; and instead taking a whole government approach to addressing complex, multifaceted issues facing our children. The Civil Service will have an opportunity to rise to the challenge, and the Government is looking forward to receiving the holistic proposal from the relevant Ministries in this regard.

And finally, from a policy perspective, another critical gap in provision of service that has been addressed recently by the Ministry of Education relates to the availability of financial assistance for those families who qualify. Starting September 2015, the **eligibility age to access Early Childhood Assistance Programme (ECAP) funding will be lowered** from 3 years 6 months to 3 years old so as to provide for continuous service and access to our young children to receive quality early childhood education.

Currently the eligibility criteria of the Needs Assessment Unit of the Department of Children and Family Services to access early childhood funding is for children up to the age of three years old, and previously the Ministry of Education's ECAP funding eligibility started at 3 years, 6 months, leaving a 5

month gap (possibility longer depending on the time of the year that the child was born) in provision which negatively impacted some children and families

Therefore, starting in September 2015, if a Caymanian child is 3 years old before September 1, families are able to apply for ECAP funding, and if eligible to receive such funding, the funding will be paid directly to the Early Childhood Centres to provide pre-primary education to those children who would then be eligible to access the Government's Reception programme at age 4 by the following September. This change in policy will make attendance at ECCE Centres more accessible for children with less disruption in their attendance, and it also provides a consistent, reliable source of funding for early childhood care and education centres that provide the service as the funding is sent directly to the centres with respect to all children receiving such funding.

That is a brief overview of the policy priorities which have guided the work of the ECCE over the past 2 years and will continue to act as an anchor for the work of the Unit in the coming years.

Thank you, Madame Speaker.