

[VERBATIM REPORT]

STANDING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL AFFAIRS

ANNUAL REPORTS

**Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts
2018-2021 Annual Reports**

SUBMISSION: Ministry of Education

**VENUE: Big Committee Room, Government
Buildings, Suva**

DATE: Thursday, 6th June, 2024

VERBATIM REPORT OF THE MEETING OF THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL AFFAIRS HELD AT THE BIG COMMITTEE ROOM, EAST WING, PARLIAMENT PRECINCTS, GOVERNMENT BUILDINGS, SUVA, ON THURSDAY, 6TH JUNE, 2024, AT 10.54 A.M.

Interviewee/Submittee: Ministry of Education

In Attendance:

1. Ms. Selina Kuruleca - Permanent Secretary
2. Mr. Isoa Toribau - Acting Deputy Secretary Professional
3. Mr. Selvin Narayan - Acting Senior Liaison Officer

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- Honourable Members, members of the media and the public, Secretariat, ladies and gentlemen - a very good morning to you all. It is a pleasure to have you this morning.

Pursuant to the Standing Orders of Parliament, specifically Standing Order 111, all Committee meetings are open to the public, except in few specific circumstances which include national security matters, third-party confidential information, personnel or human resources matters, deliberation and development on Committee recommendations and reports.

This public hearing is open to the public and to the media so for any sensitive information concerning this Inquiry that cannot be disclosed in public, this can be provided to the Committee either in private or in writing.

I wish to remind honourable Members and our submittees that all questions are to be addressed through the Chairperson. This is a parliamentary inquiry, and all information gathered is covered under the Parliamentary Powers and Privileges Act. Please, be advised that in this Committee hearing, there will be limited movement within the room and all mobile phones are to be on silent mode while the meeting is in progress.

Before I move on, I would like to introduce the honourable Members

(Introduction of Committee Members)

Standing Order 109 (2)(b) stipulates that the Standing Committee on Social Affairs is mandated to look into matters related to health, education, social services, labour, aviation, culture and media. The Standing Committee is currently deliberating on the Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts 2018-2021 Annual Reports and the Committee is here to engage and have fruitful discussions on issues and achievements during the reporting period.

Before us, honourable Members, we have the representatives from the Ministry, Madam Permanent Secretary and her Team. Before I give the floor to them to introduce themselves and proceed with their presentation and their responses to the questions that were sent by the Committee, I would like to inform you that I have given the opportunity for the honourable Members to interject with any questions that they may have, while you are doing your presentation and also providing the responses to the questions.

I give you the floor, Madam. *Vinaka.*

MS. S. KURULECA.- Madam Chairperson, honourable Members of Parliament, and the Secretariat, thank you very much for having us here.

(Introduction of Ministry of Education Officials)

MS. S. KURULECA.- Madam Chairperson, through you, I am delighted to do a very brief presentation on the highlights of the 2018-2021 Annual Reports, as requested by the Committee through the Secretariat. It is critical that we show this slide because at the time, the Ministry was still called the Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts, the name changed to Ministry of Education only in 2023, so the period in question is Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts.

The Ministry of Education, during this reporting period, we have always aligned ourselves to SDG 4 which is to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. At the time, the vision and the mission of the Ministry of Education is as per in the Annual Reports which we have tried to state here, and they remain the same throughout the reporting period.

The Vision, Mission, Values and our most important customer at the Ministry of Education is our children. This is a very well talked about topic in the Ministry because when we talk about our children, the children on both sides of those in Parliament, the children of Ministers and Opposition Members, grandchildren, so all of us are impacted in some way. So, we understand the gravity and the seriousness of the work that we carry out because everyone of us is impacted in some way or the other by the actions of the work in the Ministry of Education.

Some of our major highlights are in a graph. Again, all of these are taken out of the Annual Reports that had been published and already before you. I will speak on the figures that you will see for the three reporting periods in the Annual Reports. Our highest numbers for enrolment has always been in the primary school: 150,000 in 2018-2019; 155,000 in 2019-2020 and then 154,000 in 2020-2021.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Madam, Chairperson, through you, is this for the entire nation?

MS. S. KURULECA.- Yes, for the nation.

HON. P.K. BALA.- So, you do not have breakdown for the Government and non-Government schools?

MS. S. KURULECA.- We can provide that, we are just trying to give a synopsis. To add on, Madam Chairperson, all the data can be broken down into Division, District and Schools, including special inclusive education, regular school, Government schools, non-Government and private schools. All these data are captured in the Fiji Education Management Information System (FEMIS). The help or technical support for FEMIS is possible through the DFAT funding under the Vuvale Partnership.

I guess a point of interest that has always intrigued us is, if you look at all the years, from primary school, we have 150,640 and then look at the secondary school, it goes right down to 66,000. We lose, at least, 50 percent to 60 percent of the population right away - there is a school drop out that occurs. Where have these children gone? That is the question.

Currently, through this Coalition Government, we are working on our FEMIS to try and have an exit drop down menu where we can track. For example, when Selina leaves the system, where

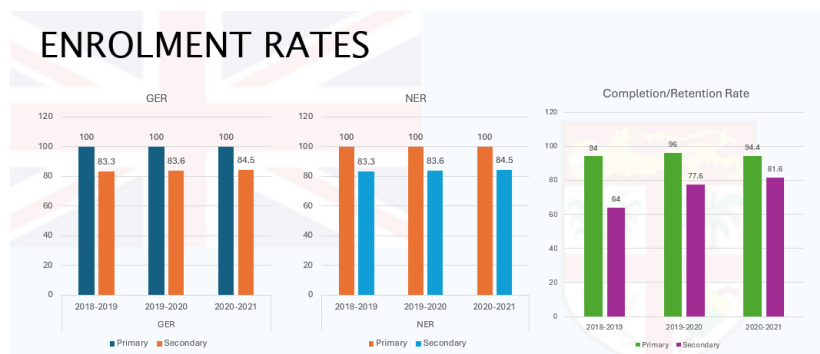
has she gone and to give her few options. This could mean that the child has moved overseas, the child has chosen not to go to school for whatever reason or the child has passed away or the child has medical conditions and is no longer able to attend school. So, anecdotal evidence is telling a step, but for us to actually capture, we do not have that possibility right now, but we are working very closely with DFAT and with our own ITC people to try and capture that data.

You might also be interested to know that the DFAT Officer who started the FEMIS not only in Fiji but across the Pacific, was tragically killed earlier this year in a car accident when he was away on holiday. We have just completed conversations with DFAT and the new officer who is coming to replace him - the consultant, will be signing on in the next couple of weeks, so that work should be able to continue.

We also have TCF and vocational, again, the data broke here for vocational studies because we had Technical Colleges previously, but in 2019-2020, they talked about closing before they finally closed.

On enrolment rates, we have the Gross Enrolment rate (GER) at the top, then National Enrolment rate (NER) and then Completion/Retention rates. Gross is that everyone who is there, so this might be people who are over age, for example, you might have a 15 year old in a primary school. The 15 year old should not be in the primary school, he/she should be in the high school, but they would be captured under GER. The NER is specific school age, for example, six years old is Class 1 to 13 year old, they should be captured in NER. So, we have tried to separate the two, just so that not only the Ministry but members of the public can be informed that we also have children who are in the “incorrect class”, for whatever reason. They start at school late, they have a medical condition or disability, they are in an area where they do not have access to school or school has been impacted in some way and then the child does not go to school for whatever reason the parents do not allow, so those children might be captured in the GER. This reporting requirement is also required of us as part of our NDP/SDG reporting. So, we have tried as much as possible to keep the data separate.

In the last column is our completion and retention rates. For 2018-2019, 94 percent completed up to Class 8 and for secondary school, 64 percent only completed. In 2019-2020, 96 percent completed for primary school and 77.6 percent for secondary school. In 2020-2021, 94.4 percent in primary completed and 81.6 percent completed for secondary.



For both GER and NER, we have obtained SDG enrolment which is 100 percent access to education. So, enrolling is going on very well, it is the completion that is the problem. People are not staying in school, we have to keep them in school. That is the biggest ask and, of course, we know and we take very seriously

the comments that have been made in Parliament about the abuse of drugs, which we know is impacting these numbers. I am sure this is just the tip of the iceberg of the troubles we will have and, of course, there are many other contributing factors to this.

Other major achievements for the three years, under Curriculum, for 2018-2019, we have had continuous free textbooks distribution. You might be interested to know, honourable Members, that the free textbooks are only given to the schools when the schools request. So, if there is no request,

that means the schools do not need it. All schools are required to do a Board of Survey, which they will then see if there is a lack of textbooks, they make the request and then it is delivered during the big school holidays.

We have some cases where there are some books that we do not have copyright at the Ministry of Education, and these are the textbooks that some of our children are required to buy at the bookstore. A case in point is the book titled '*Leaves*', which is a primary school English textbook for Class 5 to Class 8, where children are required to buy that at the bookstore because the Fiji Ministry of Education does not have copyright to make copies of that.

In 2018-2019, Year 13 syllabi was implemented, free Literacy Kits distribution continues, piloting of the mentoring support tools for Literacy and Numeracy. So, one of the things that was noted and is reflected in the Report is that we are doing the training (roll out) with the teachers and the children on literacy and numeracy but some of our Head of Schools are not able to monitor correctly. So, the training then started with the Head of Schools in 2018, so that when I am monitoring my staff here, I know exactly what I am doing instead of just delegating. This came up because there was a baseline survey done which suggested that maybe not everyone knew what was happening and that is why there were gaps coming through and the children were not learning as well as they could be.

That goes into the next one which is the Seamless Transition Workshop and then, of course, in 2018, a major achievement was the development of the Quality Framework for Physical Education. Physical education, in our country, everyone thinks it is going outside and have a run around. That is not really what happens, the teacher is required to have some knowledge and skills, theory based as well, on the types of exercises that is necessary, the rule of the games of competition, and keeping up to date.

On that note, it is rather sad that we have a huge PEMAC teacher shortage in our country currently as I speak. In Suva alone, we have about four big schools that do not have a PEMAC teacher. We do not know where they have all gone. I say this because I think there is an assumption by many of us, including us at the Ministry, the general public, that PEMAC is easy – Physical Education, Art, Music and Craft, but it is not as easy as we sometimes make it out to be.

In 2019-2020, continuous free textbooks, digital literacy e-learning and, of course, COVID-19 support started, with the Ministry of Education worked very closely with our partners because COVID-19 had come. There was a need to realign parts of the curriculum due to the pandemic. Also in 2019, training on climate change education was conducted for teachers, Hope schools programme was implemented.

The Hope School Programme is the schools that are not doing well. These are schools that have attendance issues, examination results are 50 or below, so the term used at the Ministry is 'Hope', meaning that we want to continue to give them hope or putting a positive spin on them that there is hope if we all work together and put in place interventions that can help our children. Of course, not only the children, but also doing professional development training for our teachers to enable them to fill the gaps where the gaps are identified and then, of course, the mentoring support continued.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Madam Chairperson, I just want to go back on PEMAC teachers. We are equally concerned, wherever we go, as this is an issue, and I also manage 26 primary schools and eight secondary schools. What is the solution?

MS. S. KURULECA.- Madam Chairperson, through you, currently, we are working very closely with our Fiji Teachers Registration Authority (FTRA). We have community workers or people in the community who can do music, art, physical education, but because they do not have any formal training in being a teacher, FTRA is hesitant on giving the provisional licence. So, we are having another meeting this afternoon. Schools in point are our schools in Rotuma, we have four primary and one high school. There is only one PE teacher in the whole island, but we have community people who know how to do the art and craft, or *tali ibe* (mat weaving) and all of that. So, we want those people to get a provisional licence so they can come into the schools and teach our children.

Obviously, before I can send him to my school, I need to do a short, accelerated course on how to teach because you might be a good weaver but you do not have the knowledge, know-how, skills and competency to be teaching like a regular classroom teacher. That is where the gap is, you have people but they do not have the teacher training, so to speak, so we are looking at a short accelerated course on how we can get those people into the classroom and also fulfill the requirement of the law which is FTRA registration.

Madam Chairperson and honourable Members, FTRA registration, there is leeway for provisional licences and that is what we are trying to look at on how we get these people licensed. That will take care of the gardening, arts, music, because we have natural music people in almost every community you go to. The perennial side of the teaching side is the child protection that we need to know, we need to know how to manage behaviour, we need to know how to write up reports, and all the teaching aspects, and that is the one that we also need to put it into the system now to get not only PEMAC teachers but people whom we can use.

On the same note, in our vocational schools, and I apologise, I am going a bit off track here, we do not have any more vocational teachers. So, we have gone into industry and asked the industry to join. But when industry joins, it is the welder, the tiler, the plumber, so they do not have any how-how to teach. Again, these people, we have to talk about an accelerated short course on how to teach before they become the vocational teacher. So it is that aspect, registration, then during a short, accelerated course on training, then they are able to enter the classroom - it is a requirement.

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- Madam, just the question on the current students at the various tertiary institutions, how do you encourage a student who has completed Year 13 to study PEMAC so that they can be able to teach PEMAC later on?.

MS. S. KURULECA.- Madam Chairperson, for the first time this year, we have taken our careers expo to all the Districts. We have nine Education Districts and the schools all come to the centres where the career expos is held. So, that is number one, getting all our children into the career expo so that they know this is an option.

Second is FNU, USP, Corpus Christi and Fulton Colleges for them to socialize their programmes a bit more. The ones that is being socialized the most is FNU, but the other smaller teacher training institutions, no one talks about them. We only talk about the big three which is USP, FNU and University of Fiji. However, these small ones also can do these programmes and they can talk about it, for example, Fulton College, the SDA Church can talk about it in their schools because that is given. The Arya Pratinidhi Sabha through the University of Fiji is working very closely with Madam Shaista Shameem on how we socialise it so that the Form 7 students in schools know they can go to University of Fiji as well. Apart from USP, it is the budget, how do they do their marketing to be effective.

At the beginning of this year, we were fortunate as well to engage, specifically for PEMAC, with Rasta Rasivhenge, the referee. We have had few conversations with Rasta and with James Bolabiu. As referees and as coaches, they are also going into our schools to provide that guidance to our students because not everyone is going to be the Waisale Serevi. You can be a coach or a physical and fitness person, and that is a real career path.

We have already started. By March this year, we had done these talks with both, Rasta and James Bolabiu, to about 200 students and we are going to roll out again in this term. But the intention is, again, to work very closely with Fiji Rugby Union, Fiji Netball, to then go out to these places and market. Not everyone is going to be the star on the court or on the playing field, but these are other options and it is a career option as well, so we are looking at that.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Madam Chairperson, through you, I do not know about rugby but for soccer, there is a special grant from FIFA to Fiji Football for training purposes. Is there any partnership between Ministry of Education and the sporting organisations?

MS. S. KURULECA.- Madam Chairperson, through you, the sporting organisations all have their own management and governance structure. When they need to use our children, they come, for example, the primary school or the secondary school competitions. The Ministry of Education just gives the students or the teachers to help run these things and to also play, but for signed MOUs right now, only FIFA for primary school soccer, I think it was about September, that an agreement was signed, but only for the primary. We do not have any agreement with any of the other sporting organisations as such. But if that is a pathway, we are willing to explore that, and it might be worth it.

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- *Vinaka*, Madam. My question, and I stand to be corrected on this, I heard that the reason why some of the students are not taking PEMAC studies in tertiary institution is because, when they graduate, the starting salary is far lower than if you are a Bachelor of Education (BEd) graduate. Is that true?

MS. S. KURULECA.- Yes, Madam Chairperson. Someone who has graduated with a Certificate or Diploma and gets far less than someone who has graduated with an Education Degree, that is a fact. In February this year, we recognised the Secondary Teacher Training Certificate (STTC) and the Diploma in Tertiary Training, which people already had, but for some reason, it was not recognised. It was abruptly ended and derecognised by the previous Administration.

This year, we had to go through the whole accreditation process again with the Fiji Higher Education Commission. In February this year, they approved it, so now, we have gone back to our teachers out there in the field and said to the, "If they have a Diploma in PEMAC and either the STTC or the IDTT, which is the teacher qualification, your salary readjustment will occur." So now, we have started receiving applications from them. That is the fact, that did happen, and we are trying to correct it.

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- It is only at the Diploma level for PEMAC studies?

MS. S. KURULECA.- Yes, PEMAC, and some of the Industrial Arts teachers had the same problem. The vocational teachers also had the same problem.

Madam Chairperson, in 2020-2021:

(a) COVID-19 support continued.

- (b) Continuous free textbooks distribution.
- (c) Curriculum review had started for the Literacy and Numeracy.
- (d) Only Year 12 and Year 13 external examinations were conducted. For earlier years, there were no exams. This was for Year 8 and, again, that was because of COVID-19.
- (e) Children were just coming back to school. If you look at the data that we have presented, you will also notice that some of the big drops in enrolment also happened around this time because people were not going to school.
- (f) Life Maths was piloted for Year 11. This has caused a lot of conversation in the Ministry of Education. We are currently reviewing this with the intention to move away completely, because our biggest shortage of teachers is in Maths, Physics and Computer Studies. When you have Life Maths and Pure Maths, it is the same teacher. It does not really make sense. We are working very closely with USP to see how we can fix this, and to see whether we do away with Life Maths, or what will happen? So, we are reviewing this currently.

Our major Capital Projects is on the next slide. For the year 2018-2019, there was ECE upgrading and construction of new ECE facilities. In the questions that were sent by the Committee, the details is in there, the number of facilities, their location and the names.

Natural disaster rehabilitation work, I will need to speak a bit on this. Madam Chairperson and honourable Members, *TC Winston* on 20th February, 2016, for the two years immediately after that, was just cleaning up our schools that were used as evacuation centres, schools that were destroyed, there were just lots and lots of cleaning done. There was very little rehabilitation work done and our children were moved into the tents for those who started school later on in 2016.

By 2018, when rehabilitation work started, they were moving out of the tent into the classroom. In 2020, they moved out of the classroom to back home because of COVID-19. So that was a volatile period for many of our children and for many of us, because it was one disaster after another at that period in time.

We acknowledge the partnership that the Fiji Government had with all our technical partners and the funding agencies that allowed a lot of our schools' rehabilitation to be started and completed. Currently, we are in the last lap of the rehabilitation for *TC Yasa* but there were two or three schools in Qamea which were rebuilt after *TC Winston*, but the companies or the external partners that were organised by the schools at that time did not build it to standard. So, I think Qamea keeps coming up in Parliament and everywhere else because as soon as one cyclone comes, that is the first school that goes. That is the only one from the *TC Winston* days that we can say that the rehabilitation was not completed properly. But every other rehabilitation for *TC Winston* has been completed. The only rehabilitation going on now is *TC Yasa* and *TC Gita*.

Construction of new primary and secondary school in 2018-2019, renovation works for government and non-government schools, construction of teacher quarters for non-government schools, as well as school infrastructure construction in schools located in educationally disadvantaged areas. Again, the details of these schools are in the written responses that we have also provided.

Madam Chairperson, for 2019-2020, construction of new facilities for ECE continued, as well non-government and government schools. Upgrading and maintenance in non-government primary and secondary schools. Renovation works in government and non-government schools, including Ministry of Education Offices. Natural Disaster rehabilitation works continued for affected schools.

Madam Chairperson, 2020-2021, upgrading and maintenance of non-government and government schools, including Ministry of Education institutional Offices, construction of government and non-government schools' infrastructure. We note here the Ministry of Education institutional Offices because the Ministry of Education staff continue to increase, but we are in exactly the same space we have been in. People can hardly move, so just making it a bit more open in almost every space that we have to allow more people to sit down at their desks. So, it is breaking down walls and, of course, yes, just making it a bit more comfortable so people can do their work properly.

Madam Chairperson, when we are talking about rehabilitation to institutional Offices, we are also talking about the internet. Some of our buildings have almost zero internet, never mind that ITC have problems sometimes with our internet but our cables also need a lot of work. So, that continues to be a challenge. Even where we are located right now, we are in Senikau House, some afternoons, the offices upstairs do not get the water, if there is a water shortage. So, we are hoping that we can relocate to new rental spaces, but I also know that that is not going to happen in this financial year because it is getting really hard.

Madam Chairperson, all of our buildings are not disability friendly - the main institutional buildings in any of our offices, whether it is Sigatoka, Nausori, and that is a problem. I am sure for those of us who have been to the Labasa Office, it is four flight of stairs and that is it. You walk up and it is not very conducive for our customers, particularly when we have grandparents looking after grandchildren, we have to walk all the way up there, but that is where the office is located. So, that is a challenge in terms of customer service for our elderly parents who need to access our services, and they would need to access it for transport, et cetera.

MR. I. TORIBAU.- Madam Chairperson, the next slide in on the Major Initiatives. In 2018-2019, we continued with the Free Education Grant and all enrolled students from 5 years old to Year 13 continued to receive Free Education Grant (FEG) and transport assistance for about 110,000 students who benefitted from this assistance with 19 primary schools and also two secondary schools were assisted with boat and an engine. The free milk continued to be supplied to schools with about 20,000 students benefitted from this initiative initiated by the previous Administration. Also, the supply of water tanks to six ECE Centers, 230 primary schools and 73 secondary schools were also assisted.

In the period 2019-2020, FEG also continued of the same - enrolled students from five-year-old to Year 13 continued to receive FEG. Also, transport assistance benefitted 92,162 students. The Free Milk Initiative continued where 4,211 students benefitted. Water tanks were supplied to about 222 primary schools and 52 secondary schools.

In the period 2020-2021, FEG continued to escalate and continued to be given to all the students. Transport assistance benefitted 90,000 students and seven schools were assisted with boat and engine. Water tanks were given to only 24 primary schools and 12 secondary schools during this period.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Madam Chairperson, before we go on to another subject matter - Heritage and Arts, this FEG, is this across the board, for special schools as well, per child for the same amount? Is transport assistance still in place? What we are hearing from bus operators, some of the companies that had that arrangement with Vodafone, the machine is out of order. How does that work for you people? Is Free Milk still in place? What is the policy, within the Ministry, for distribution of water tanks?

MS. S. KURULECA.- Madam Chairperson, through you, to respond to honourable Bala's question, the is available to all students. We also have Special Inclusive Education Grant (SIEG) for students with disability and there is also vocational grant that is available for students who choose to do vocational studies. We intentionally put the five-year-old there, because you might receive complaints that my child goes to ECE, but he is not receiving the grant, that is because the child would be under the age of five. The current legislation says five-year-old can enroll in school - ECE.

On the bus operators, we have had a lot of complaints that we are dealing with, not only Vodafone Fiji, but also with LTA. The bus operators are supposed to upkeep their machines in partnership with Vodafone but at the last meeting that we have had with the bus operators and Vodafone Fiji Limited, they are looking for a new service provider for this bus card business. It was supposed to be upgraded after three years but there was never an upgrade done to the system and I think it is now in the seventh to eighth year of operation, there is still no upgrade to the system. The last conversation around this, they were looking for new bus card provider. I guess that is the question for the Ministry of Transport on what is happening in that department in relation to Vodafone. That is out of our hands.

We have continued to impress upon parents that even though the Ministry has updated your child's card, child needs to physically take it to Vodafone and redeem it. A lot of our parents think that the Ministry has redeemed it, so just go to the bus and it will work. No, it will not work unless the bus machine has the redeeming function working which is, I think, a lot of complaints that we are reading on social media.

We are also talking to bus operators on why is it that they do not allow their machine to have a redeemable function working, that is very easy, I presume. So, again, that is something between Vodafone and the bus operator. But we top up the card, we load all the money to Vodafone, the child needs to go to Vodafone, redeem, then it will work.

The calculation of the bus card is in three stages, so for parents who want to go more than three stages, that is their choice, and parents need to assist with that. Those who tap on the bus card, there are three types of bus cards available for those who qualify or have the subsidies card from the Ministry of Education - a combined household income below \$16,000.

Of course, then we also have the RSL providers which, I think, almost in every Parliament session, we hear debate about it. We get a bit embarrassed, but we have not had a voucher increased. We have had one voucher increased from 88 cents to a \$1.12 independent of the terrain and this is for something that we find really nonsensical because some people travel for 10 kilometres in easy terrain, some in 3 kilometres in very hard terrain, but they still get exactly the same number of vouchers which is one -\$1.12.

When exams occur, if only two of us in this room take the physics exam, only two of us will get on that RSL, which means we only get \$2.24 for the RSL provider because that is the amount of vouchers or the kids that get on. We are hoping that in the upcoming Budget, that this is really closely looked at because RSL providers are providing a critical service in terms of access to education for our children. But if we are not getting the budget for transport, the children are not going to go to school.

Then we also have children who go on two modes of transport -they get on the boat, get off the boat, get on the carrier but still with one voucher. When we see that there are kids who no longer need the vouchers or some schools have gone smaller because everyone has moved to the urban area, through a very stringent monitoring mechanism, we are then able to transfer unused Nukulau Fijian

School vouchers to my school - Suva Grammar School. Then I can use the vouchers but that takes a long time processing that because we have to validate it - the number of children going to School A has decreased and this amount of money is now available to then be used by someone else who needs it more than others.

Where you can influence, please, influence, we really feel for our RSL providers. I know, Madam Chairperson, you yourself have been very involved in this because everyone who knows someone in the village, they will go to you, Members of Parliament, or they go to every PS asking them, why is this money so little? Fuel has increased, cost of repairs has increased, labour cost has increased but the bus fare voucher only increased by about 30 cents.

We have already proposed it. We have proposed to change from one voucher to, at least, three vouchers one way or give a flat rate or something, for trucks in hard-to-go terrain because in some places you go, we were up at Sawanikula, it was like going on the riverbed and for one voucher, if I am the truck driver, I am not going to go. But a lot of these truck drivers are doing it out of compassion and love for our children. I think we need to give a little.

Obviously, we are trying to encourage our parents to get out of this dependency mentality that the Government of the day needs to pay for everything. We need to also get the parents to assist wherever they can in terms of getting our children to school to access education.

The Free Milk, your question, Sir, this is no longer being done. If you see the figures between 2018-2019, that has reduced drastically from 20,000 children to 4,000 children benefitting and it is no longer provided. The only other thing provided is the sanitary pad vouchers which the Ministry continues for our Class 8 girls and above. They take the vouchers to the supermarkets or to the chosen vendors, and they redeem the vouchers there to get sanitary pads.

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- It also follows the criteria of \$16,000 combined income?

MS. S. KURULECA.- No, for sanitary pads, everyone can access.

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- *Vinaka.*

MS. S. KURULECA.- The policy around the distribution of water tanks, tanks are supplied to us mostly by our donor partners. When a school is being built or any renovations to a school, we tell them that they need to have a water tank, including pumps. The policy is such that you are provided with the water tanks for relief when there is a water crisis or a disaster. To be specific as to how many water tanks and what number of litres a school is able to get, there is nothing at all in the policy regarding that. If it is a small school or a large school, I do not recall seeing any in our policy that reflects that. Room for improvement, yes.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Is there any provision in the allocation on the fact that the schools can purchase water tanks?

MS. S. KURULECA.- We are the biggest supplier of water tanks. The school just have to ask the Ministry. We have yards of it. The schools just request to the Ministry and the Ministry team will go and scope. We require schools to make sure that they build the stand. Once the stand is there, then we build.

We also encourage schools to do rainwater harvesting, so where they put the water tank, it needs to be in an area where they can collect rainwater. Yes, we have schools who can use water

from Water Authority of Fiji, but our recent experience in Term 1 has demonstrated that this is not always the best solution, especially when all the water pipes had burst.

The Ministry of Education can supply water tanks, we need to receive a written request from the school through the Head of School. The School Management Committee (SMC) can ask but the Head of School needs to be the one writing the letter, because that is the one we will go and follow up with in terms of the setup.

On to the Heritage and Arts, for 2018-2019:

- (a) Draft Fiji National Cultural Policy consultation was conducted;
- (b) Drafting of the Heritage Bill;
- (c) School cultural programmes celebrated in education divisions;
- (d) Community cultural development programme conducted in multicultural centres and communities;
- (e) Cultural Art's teacher programme conducted in schools;
- (f) Heritage site restoration for Nakaseleka Community Church.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Madam Chairperson, through you, the two Policies - Fiji National Cultural Policy and the National Museum Policy which were drafted and consultations were held, what is the current status of these two Policies? Heritage and Arts is under Ministry of iTaukei Affairs now.

MR. S. KURULECA.- Madam Chairperson, this would now have been imported across to the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, but interestingly enough when we were preparing these, I asked exactly that same question because I have not seen it. We are looking within, but as far as I understand from speaking with my staff, that these would have all been imported across when the name changed from last year (2023).

We could definitely follow-up with the Director Heritage and Arts and give you a written response, Madam Chairperson. Then, of course, you have your National Museum Policy in 2019-2020, the implementation of 2003 Intangible Cultural Heritage Convention. So, Intangible Cultural Heritage is like the *kava* or our *yaqona*, that is an intangible heritage. It is part of our tradition. So, Fiji is also a signatory to that and that is run through UNESCO.

National Culture Day is celebrated in Divisions. The restoration of Levuka Community Hall and St. Johns Cawaci Church.

2020-2021- rehabilitation for heritage sites as per list there, then nationwide Girmit Day celebration throughout Fiji, then the Remembrance Day Exhibition by the National Archives.

Library Services of Fiji, very quickly honourable Members, 2018-2019 National Library Week Celebrations. School libraries were set up for 50 ECE Centres, 27 primary schools and eight secondary schools, six community libraries set up in selected communities in Fiji. Social empowerment and education programme, integrated activities in collaboration with the US Embassy and Fiji's Ministry of Education is working on renewing the MOU with the US Embassy in terms of library services. Currently the paperwork is at the SG's Office. Integrated activities in collaboration with the Chinese Embassy for the Nasese public library.

2019-2020, the new one there is Solar Powered Educational Learning Library (SolarSPELL), and this initiative was piloted in four schools.

2020-2021 - Community library setup, and right now we have community library or community halls used for study that is funded by DFAT and we have asked the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs to partner with us on this, we have seen a marked improvement in examination results when we provide a space for our children to study in after school. My *koro ni vasu* in Bureta in Ovalau, in 2022, exam results was 37 percent pass rate, in one year only of running this, the passing rate for this year was 87 percent. That is why we want the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs because they are the gatekeepers to our iTaukei communities and now it is finding and working with FCOS as well as our non-iTaukei communities on how we will infiltrate their communities in terms of setting up these community centre libraries for study.

COVID-19 events and related support, we had a huge debate about whether we should include this or not. We all know that COVID-19 impacted everyone in all shapes and form, and this is just some highlights of what happened in our schools.

Term 2 in 2020 was closed and reopened in Term 3. Then end of Term 1 in 2021 until November 2021, only Year 12 and Year 13 went to school. Some schools were identified and used as medical evacuation centers. Of course, the school reopening, COVID-19 safe school reopening awareness and training was conducted in 2020-2021 for all our schools in Fiji. The Ministry of Education worked collaboratively with all of our education partners and government agencies in implementing safe school re-opening measures.

Madam Chairperson and honourable Members of the Committee, that is supposed to have been only our highlights. I apologise if it took a bit longer than we anticipated and submitted for your information and your furtherance. Before you is also our written responses.

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- Thank you for your comprehensive and clear presentation. I know you have highlighted some of the issues and some of the answers to the questions that was sent. We would like to ask if you could go through the questions and just summarise what you have.

MS. S. KURULECA.- Madam Chairperson, through you, we received the questions through the Secretariat on the 2018 to 2021 Annual Reports for the Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts. I will just go through the main parts.

Question No. 1

What policies are currently in place that guard the implementation of the programmes of the Ministry of Education?

The Ministry continues to have a strategic plan. That was for those period - 2018 to 2021. Then, of course, in 2023, we had our Education Summit which was held in Denarau, that is now in form in our current policy and programme framework for the next 10 years and that is now in place.

The big item coming out of the Denarau Declaration would be the Education Commission which is tasked with the review of the National Education Curriculum Framework which will then inform any big changes that needs to happen in our national curriculum.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Madam Chairperson, through you, who will be part of the Commission?

MS. S. KURULECA.- Madam Chairperson, through you, we had advertised the positions, the names have been submitted to the Office of the Prime Minister and we are waiting for endorsement from the Office of the Prime Minister.

What we did was, when we advertised, we looked at the main thematic areas that came out from the Denarau Declaration and try to match our applicants according to the areas of their expertise. But as per Cabinet decision that was taken in March this year, the names have to be endorsed from the Office of the Prime Minister, so we have sent that across, and we are waiting.

That is for the next couple of years, but the past years as per annual report, there was a strategic plan in place for the Ministry which we have continued to use as a guide. Then in July 2023, a new strategic plan was developed that was used to inform part of the Denarau Declaration and this was firmed up in the actual document that was published or launched in November 2023.

Question No. 2

**How many new schools and ECE Centres were registered and established in 2018-2021?
Where are these schools located?**

The ECEs for the period in question was 24 in total. The number of new primary schools registered was eight and four secondary schools.

Question No. 3

What is the current status on the renovation and upgrade of schools that were selected for the works to be carried out from 2018-2021?

The remarks are there in the table and the details of the schools that were assisted is also annexed to the documents before you.

Location by Education District	No. of ECE Registered
Ra	1
Lautoka/Nadi/Yasawa	5
Nadroga/Navosa	4
Suva	6
Nausori	4
Macuata/Bua	1
Cakaudrove	2
Eastern	1
TOTAL	24

Location by Education District	No. of Primary Registered
Lautoka/Nadi/Yasawa	5
Suva	2
Eastern	1
TOTAL	8

Location by Education District	No. of Secondary Registered
Ra	1
Lautoka/Nadi/Yasawa	1
Suva	2
TOTAL	4

In 2021, there was no rehabilitation as such or building grants because all the money went out to TC Yasa rehabilitation. So, it became a matter of prioritising for the Ministry which schools

did we need to send it to and we stopped the building grant at the time so that those schools could be re-opened.

One of the issues that we have noticed is that we talk a lot about rehabilitation, but we are not really doing anything about grounds for our children to play. That is an important part of rehabilitation. It is a huge cost when we talk about building grounds in Fiji. We have a lot of free spaces, open spaces but looking in for technical partners, donor partners, looking at other Government agencies to assist us it is just becomes a real issue because it is so expensive.

However, I bring it again, to your attention, honourable Members, because we tell our kids not to do drugs in everything else, but we are not giving them another option. We have to build gyms, we have to build grounds, if we want our children to really stay away from drugs or engage in healthy behaviour.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Madam Chairperson, through you, Madam PS, the Committee visited Ba Special School and I must thank the Head of the School and the staff who are really doing well in looking after the students with special needs. They are currently renting the building. We were told that there is land available. Are there any plans to build a new school or get a new building done in the current location where the land is available?

MS. S. KURULECA.- Madam Chairperson, through you, we can definitely talk with the Ba Education Office and see if they have submitted the necessary paperwork, how can we support it. We do know that some of our schools are running out of space so is it in the best interest of the school to stay there or relocate, so we will have to have that conversation.

In the past couple of years, we have really begun to see some land lease issues so we are also trying to address that. For example, in Kadavu, we were only aware of (that was brought to our office) only one school had a land lease issue, and we worked with iTLTB and the Ministry of Lands. We have visited all our schools and there are many of our schools that have land lease issues, so we are just resolving that now. We definitely can look at Ba Special School and what we can do for them.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Madam Chairperson, through you, Madam PS, what my colleague is basically saying is that the original school was destroyed by fire so they relocated to Ba Muslim Primary School. The Government has already given them the land so the only issue now is for them to build the school so that they can be relocated to the new precincts.

MS. S. KURULECA.- We will definitely look at it and maybe, we can also provide a recent update of where that conversation is up to, Madam Chairperson. Thank you, honourable Member.

Question No. 4

What is the Ministry doing to address the issue of Drug and Substance Abuse amongst students?

This continues to be an issue; we have various policies that guide what will happen to our children. In our school, we have SOPs. Depending on the type of drug use - someone with cigarette or someone with marijuana, so two different sets completely, one becomes a criminal offence and we involve the Police, but as much as possible in all of these things, we work with the parents as well because most of our children involved are all under 18years.

We have heard publicly being stated by the honourable Prime Minister and, of course, my Minister of Education about testing so we are looking at that. We have a few options available to us, so we are currently engaged with the Office of the Solicitor-General on exactly what testing will look like. It is very sensitive. Initially, people were talking about blood test and urine test, but that cannot happen with our children, so we have found a provider that can do saliva testing and mucus testing. It is going to cost us. We have also taken that up to the Budget Committee and we hope that they are able to budget for it and how we do the testing.

The testing is just one part of this whole process. Before we test, we have to have people trained to be able to administer the test, we need to have the consent of the parents that we will test your child. If you are found positive, what do we do? What is the intervention pathway? Where will the intervention occur? Is it in the school, in the community, in the church or at St. Giles Hospital or do we need to build rehabilitation centres? We are looking at all these and, of course, the biggest out of all is child protection issues. We are still dealing with the child, who made some very poor decisions to take drugs. It is a big puzzle, but testing is one of the things right now that the Ministry is closely looking at. How do we do that? But we need to develop the policies around that before any testing can be considered for our children.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Madam Chairperson, through you, it is a serious issue. Fiji has gone to a stage, and if we are not going to take strong decisions, I do not know where we are going to end up. What you have mentioned is the process and all those things, that is fine. I will give you one example.

Last week, Fiji Football has conducted tests during the Fiji FACT. They have found few players tested positive. I think we have to do something like that, honestly. I have seen your responses here which is very good and the policies, but the manner in which our children are taking drugs is really sad.

On behalf of the Committee, we strongly feel and say that something needs to be done. If we have to test, let us do it.

MS. S. KURULECA.- My own mental health background tells me that we need to fix, not only the children, but the perpetrators, the people who are giving it to our children. Anecdotal evidence suggest that some of them are being used as pushers, and it is the parents who are giving it to our children. For us, that is the saddest part of it all. What if a government initiative is put in place and the child continues to go back into a home, that is prolific drug use and chaotic. This is the life of the child we know, and we will always know and, of course, when they come to school their outlet is to the other kids. They come and sell it to the other kids, they bully and abuse the other children, so it needs a whole community, a multisectoral approach.

If all the MPs say, “You test, PS, you find a way and you test it”, I will gladly accept that and we will find the way to do it, because we are in a very bad situation. I often said that we used to worry about marijuana, but that is the least of our problems now. It is the synthetic drugs that is going to kill us as a nation, and we need to get rid of it.

We work very closely with the Police, we work very closely with the joint agency, the Narcotics and the Cabinet decision that was passed in the last Cabinet, that is really going to help give us some teeth. The problem is, as soon as we touch one kid, everyone goes to social media. This is another issue. If we make an example of may be one child, one school, it becomes a deterrent.

We have also had conversations with the Ministry of Labour. A lot of our parents who are no longer in Fiji and are working on the different schemes, they are sending the money home to the children. But there is no budgeting and no investment plans, so the child just waits for the MoneyGram to come and take it and spend it. They do not go to school, but just loaf around.

There needs to be another intervention. How do we rehabilitate these children? But how do we rehabilitate the parents that this is not the way of life? They will finish working in the PALM Scheme and come back home. They have not built a house and the children are uneducated because they think receiving MoneyGram every Friday is life. That is not life! It is not a way to live.

We are very keen on exploring and working with whoever will work with us, so one of our latest initiatives is we are working on an MOU, which is before the Solicitor-General. It is Drug Free Australia, working with the Drug Free Fiji, through Ms. Kalesi on how we take it to our schools and how we train our teachers. When you find someone, what do you do with them. Incarceration, our prisons will be full, and they do not get the necessary help, so it needs to be rehabilitative. But where do we build these rehabilitation centers? I think we need to be the ambulance before the cliff instead of at the end of the cliff, and before the cliff means all of the education awareness prevention strategies needs to really be beefed up from the highest-ranking office in this land to the common person. How do we make sure that our children know the dangers of drugs, et cetera?

Our Substance Abuse Advisory Team do a lot of awareness, we keep good records, we have counselling hubs. In our new budget proposal, we are trading off some of our vacant, unused positions to have more counsellors in schools. It has to be wider, and this is what we will continue to explore and look at.

HON. RATU R.S.S. VAKALALABURE.- Madam Chairperson, PS, I really love your explanation about what the Ministry is doing to combat the drug pandemic in schools. I was just thinking out loud, listening to your presentation, would it be a good idea to introduce police officers and K9 units in schools? Just like how they do in the US schools, they have police officers searching their bags or K9 unit dogs sniffing their bags. That is another way we can do prevention because I am just wondering and thinking that the children nowadays are totally different, very different, and they are very smart, and it is like they are living in another timeline. They literally take the drugs, especially to school, sell it and some students nowadays are even bigger than their teachers and they are not afraid to do that.

So, just thinking from what you were saying, from your perspective, we could probably have police officers as a deterrent, just seeing the police uniform at the gate and then probably have a K9 unit dog sniffing, that is another big deterrent, and it could also help. Maybe that could be some of the ways, because what honourable Bala is saying - the testing part, it is good, but do we have the budget for it?

It comes at a cost, but we have the services of our police and our K9 unit. We can show the students that we are in charge, they are not in charge, especially because the children nowadays are totally different and dangerous.

About the Substance Abuse Advisory Council, all the necessary measures, the Ministry is doing that, like training of the teachers, et cetera, but at the end of the day, it still does not work. Maybe, we have to think outside the box and maybe try that. A police officer in uniform being there and K9 unit dog sniffing their bags is a big deterrent and that is it. Just probably a recommendation from my end to the Ministry but I will leave it to your hands, Madam PS.

MS. S. KURULECA.- Thank you, Madam Chairperson, and honourable Vakalalabure. That is awesome because it is already available and for me, it is deterrence. You just deter one or two people, everyone will quickly fall in line. They are just testing us, and we definitely will take that on board and have that conversation, the police K9 unit is already on board, it is just how do we do it.

One of the other measures that we have, again, it is budget submission, is our big boarding schools - to get wardens into our boarding schools because our teachers are overburden. The teacher wakes up at 4.00 a.m., does the morning prep, then the breakfast, then goes to the classroom. Returns to their home at 3.00 p.m., change, does afternoon duties, if they are on duty again for night study, the teacher does not go to sleep until about 10.00 p.m. to 11.00 p.m. and this is one teacher to so many boarders.

So, one of the things that we have put into our budget is the need for warden assistants, just like the USP concept. The warden assistants full time job is supervision of the children, making sure the children's items do not get stolen and checking their boxes, so that would be part of the conditions.

have revived the board of governors in all our government schools. The PTA in our government schools are full on with this and our ex-scholars in the various government schools, now it is just that we have to get creative. Otherwise, we are going to lose our children. So, thank you for that.

Question No. 5

When will the Ministry reintroduce School Counsellors to schools?

Already reintroduced through our counselling hubs. We currently have all four Divisions with counsellors in the counselling hubs. Divisional Counsellors, we have requested and 33 people who have been trained in counselling who are classroom teachers and counsellors. In the next financial year, we want these people to be fulltime counsellors. The plan is four Divisional Counsellors, nine District Counsellors, the remaining balance about 20, we put them to large boarding schools, in addition to the Chaplain. Then hotspots where there is a lot of use, put additional counsellors in those district offices.

Question No. 6

What is the Ministry's policy on addressing the issues of Truancy in schools?

Working with parents through CAPS meeting, working with our Police so, again, I will use the example of Suva Grammar School. The Suva Grammar teachers are with the Police in town in the morning and, again, after school, and I can tell you that truancy has gone right down.

Drug use in Suva Grammar School, Term 1 has zero reported cases, zero incidents, and no one was found. So, I have said that with much pride as well because I am an ex-Suva Grammar School. I know a couple of years before when you want to talk about a drug case, just look at Suva Grammar School. So, this has now changed because the Principal has really come down hard, supervision on campus, in town and it is where they can access.

Of course, we have policies in the Ministry of Education, and we continue to encourage our Heads of Schools to monitor. If the child is not coming, what are the factors that is happening at home? We have given our Heads of Schools, and we try to have once a month meeting with all of our 1,200 schools through Zoom and that has been exciting because everyone is online at the same time.

Sometimes, it is just become a social gathering, but just talking to them about the importance of basic stuff - just saying *bula vinaka* or 'Hello' to a child, using success stories. We have some really, really big schools in Lautoka but you know, the Principal stands outside the school and greets every student that comes into the school. That in itself will show the child that someone is concerned for him or her, so maybe that is all that is needed. So Natabua High School is a very good example, the other example is Lautoka Primary School, Lautoka Methodist School, so the Principal just stands out there and talk to the kids when they come in the morning.

Of course, we are also encouraging our Heads of School to talk to their staff. There are many issues to for our staff. They have children of their own, some of them get up to mischief and I know mine sometimes do, but just to keep encouraging them, showing all of our children that this is a family and there are rules that we care for you when something happens to you.

We have policies and on Page No. 6 are other strategies that we have continued to look at, to help our children stay in school.

On top of Page No. 7 - Differentiated and Alternative Learning Programmes, one of the things that the Ministry is now looking at is those kids who are late for whatever reason - developmental delays. How do we get them on board? We need to teach the parents. Teaching parents how to read with their child so that is like based on the community hall idea, that the parents sit with their children and read with their children. It does not have to be in English, but in whatever language they are comfortable with. Just sitting with the child so that the child also learns that someone is joining him or her in that difficult journey because you can become very frightening, particularly for our primary school children.

For those who cannot come to school, we encourage our Heads of Schools and our District Divisional Offices to send worksheets home with them but bring the worksheets back and mark it. That bit too sometimes is missing, and we learnt this lesson after COVID-19.

The current status of digitisation of old examination records had started at the Ministry of Education with our Examination Assessment Unit, however, we stopped it because in trying to digitalise our examination records, they have to take the book apart. So, it destroys the book, which we do not want. So, in our budget submission, I have put in for a bookeye scanner which is very, very expensive, so that we do not have to take the records apart and it just does an automatic scan, and we can capture or digitalise the examination results.

We are hopeful that this will come through in the budget, and if it does, then we will be able to capture everyone's records from 1956. We are excited about that, and we are trying to put forward the names of people's results, we should look at first from 1956 till 2001, or the results you want to look at.

In some of the school visitations, they still have their old records of their children. There is a tall Indo-Fijian gentleman in Tamavua Primary, who was a student at that Tamavua School at the corner in 1933, and they have the book. Of course, all of us touching the book does not help for the book. These are the kinds of records that we also should be looking at saving. It is part of our identity.

Last week, we had Ratu Sukuna Day celebrations. We were trying to find the records from Wairuku Indian School. Where is the record when the *Turaga Talai* actually signed in when he was registered as a student? This is information about where we have come from. We are also looking at not only the examinations, but how do we capture all these old records. Because Heritage and Arts

has gone to the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, it means that we continue to work together to see how we can fix this problem.

Question No. 9:

How many community libraries and school libraries were set up in 2018-2021?

The figures are on Page 8.

Libraries Set-Up

Libraries	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020-2021	Total
Community	6	3	-	9
Schools	46 ECE + 29 Primary + 9 Secondary = 84	22 ECE + 18 Primary + 7 Secondary = 47	9 ECE + 17 Primary + 6 Secondary + 1 Institution = 33	164

Question No. 10:

The Committee has noted the immense number of teachers that have migrated during the reporting years. How is the Ministry addressing the issue of shortage of teachers in Fiji?

Honourable Members, I ask you to support us in getting our teachers' salary increased, please. We have continued to talk with the teacher unions on salary increment. We have also spoken with the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and the Ministry of Civil Service and also raised it with the honourable Prime Minister, on how do we compensate.

We also know that compensation or money remuneration will not always happen because we do not have the money, so we are working with the Ministry of Civil Service on other possibilities, including medical insurance for families, flexi- hours, and gradual salary readjustment. Honourable Members you are all well aware that the regularisation exercise that was mandated through the Government policy earlier this year, the Fiji's Ministry of Education had the largest number of teachers that were regularised.

We had 1,984 acting in substantively vacant positions, of which we regularised approximately 1,600. The acting was anywhere from two years to 25 years – acting in one position, to another, and to another. I mean, 25 years, that is a whole career. We were very pleased to be able to do that, and that helped alleviate some of the pressure on our teachers. In our stepup exercise, again, through Government policy earlier this year, we stepped up approximately 4,000 officers in the Ministry (3,800 plus).

HON. P.K. BALA.- Since you have talked about salary increase, how are you taking these teacher union's strike notice by both unions?

MS. S. KURULECA.- Yes, we have asked both the unions to continue to dialogue and we have spoken informally as well with both the General Secretaries. They have assured me that their direction is the Ministry of Finance, not really targeting the Ministry of Education because I understand from the conversations that we have had, that the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Civil Service is looking at across the board Civil Service salary increment, and because of that, we continued to just ask the union, please, continue to dialogue.

What we can do at the Ministry of Education we have done through the regularisation step up. If it comes up for debate or anything, we will support the teachers in terms of, “Yes, we think you are long overdue, like every other civil servant in this country”, but we have to keep the dialogue door open.

I have a meeting with the Permanent Secretary for the Ministry of Employment, Productivity and Workplace Relations when he returns from his overseas trip because there is a process for strike action. As far as I understand it, no applications have been made yet, and that is why we want to keep the door as wide open as possible on how we mitigate this.

The cost of living is extremely high, so we understand completely where our staff are coming from. But we also know that we cannot pay the 30 percent, from the conversations we have had with the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Civil Service. That is why the Civil Service is looking at the other possibilities, besides compensation, which includes insurance, crash sites at workplaces, so that children of teachers can come and work, rest and do their study. We are looking at life insurance. When I brought up life insurance, I think people thought I was mad, but it needs to be other things that keep people attracted to the profession and staying in the profession.

Additionally, I just also want to add that at present, globally, there is a 40 million shortage of teachers in the world. By 2030, there will be 44 million, and that is the UNESCO projections. So, obviously, they are all leaving the teaching profession and going to other places, not necessarily going to teach somewhere else, and that is because the pay is better, the classrooms are less full, they do not have unruly children, so it is a lot of factors.

In Suva today, you go into one classroom, you would be lucky if you have 1:45 teacher to student. The numbers are outrageous, and so that is not conducive to learning and teaching. The discipline measures available to teachers today is a lot less than that was available to you and me. So, that also is a factor, and like I said, teacher shortage is a global crisis.

We, obviously, are doing something right with the teachers that we have produced from our local institutions because they also continue to be paid the big bucks when they go to Australia and New Zealand. The recent announcement by New Zealand in April that they were going to go straight from application to permanent residency, instead of work visa, that threw a spanner in our works, but this is the way the world is going, you just need to get creative.

Children will always need a teacher in the classroom because they are not yet self-directed learners. So, it is attracting more into the profession, so we have also been engaged with our teacher-training institutions to start identifying the based candidates they have in Year 2 and Year 3. So, even before they go into practical, if Isoa is really a good student, we want Isoa to start coming into the teaching profession now. So, we also have to deal with the other side, which is the FTRA registration, because they are not fully qualified yet, so things like that. But we are also trying to get creative on how we enrol or attract teachers.

HON. RATU R.S.S. VAKALALABURE.- Madam Chairperson, through you, Madam PS, on that same question, we were actually having a discussion regarding the responses and the way it is worded. “The Ministry as of January 2024, started recruiting final year students who are enrolled in Diploma”. So, we were just discussing and were thinking, are those the ones who come for practical or these ones are fully employed but they have not graduated? Can you just explain that for us, please?

MS. S. KURULECA.- Madam Chairperson through you, yes, these are the base students that they have. Many of the students are on scholarships, so we also have to ensure that they do not violate their scholarship conditions. If you are a fulltime student, then make sure you remain the full-time student. So, what hours can they give to us if they had to come into the classroom?

They still have to finish their programme of study, so Isoa is a really good student, but TSLS requires him to be full time enrolled. That means for Isoa to come during the school day, it might be only one day a week. “Yes, we will take you”, just to start training him to get into the system.

The other issue that arise is, how do we pay him? What is the allocation or from which allocation? All of that right now, it is just volunteering for those who want to come and be part of this apprenticeship?

HON. RATU R.S.S. VAKALALABURE.- I really like the initiative that the Ministry of Education has done, especially with this, like you are actually guiding this next generation of teachers straight into the pipeline. Thank you very much, it is a good policy, thank you PS.

MS. S. KURULECA.- Creativity has become our main job now because it is shocking - the number of resignations and it is right across the workforce. I think in every Ministry, you are also struggling, but we are confident that we still have good people, good students, who want to contribute to the welfare of our nation and we want to attract these people back.

HON. RATU R.S.S. VAKALALABURE.- Just for your information, how do you determine on what people to come in?

MS. S. KURULECA.- We do not determine, we ask the Heads of Education Department in the schools to identify for us. The other party is dealing with FTRA because they are not teachers.

Question No.11

Which legislations and policies are currently under review, if any and why?

The Education Act 1966, we have a paper in circulation before it will come to Cabinet for endorsement and, of course, the consultations will then begin. One Senior Legal Officer said to me, “PS, it is not going to be called the Education (Amendment) Act, just say new Education Act 2025, because it is so outdated.

We know that there is a lot of work to do, and that is the main guiding document before we change any of the other policies. Internally, we are reviewing all of our policies because a lot of the contemporary issues we are facing is not captured in the policies that we currently have.

Question No. 12

To what extent has the Ministry met its SDG performance targets? What were the challenges for non-implementation?

The Table before you on page 10 is the indicator of SDG 4 that we have achieved. Net enrolment for early education 100 percent, primary school 100 percent, secondary school 80 percent. Literacy and Numeracy – literacy is 83 percent and numeracy is 93 percent. That is for Year 5. Year 7, literacy - 47 percent and numeracy - 52 percent. The numbers are quite low. For the longest time, we, at the Ministry of Education on the period being reported, no one talked about the Literacy and Numeracy results, no one talked about the Pacific Islands Literacy and Numeracy Assessment (PILNA) results because it was very poor.

At the Education Summit in 2023, we gave all these statistics to the public and we shared it with all our partners and asked our partners, “Please, help us”, and the help started with training our teachers and training our Curriculum Development Unit (CDU). We asked, what are we doing wrong? Where are the gaps? Looking at the textbooks again, it is really important to have the right textbook for the children at the appropriate age, so it is the whole system.

We are just gathering all these information, re-looking at it, preparing reports so that when the Education Commission actually gets endorsed and starts, they will have this as a starting block. The last Education Commission, we were just informed that some of these policy decisions in the Ministry was in 2000, that is 25 years, so it is really a lot of work to do. We are very concerned and we continue to put into place measures to fix that.

On Page 11, some of challenges that the Ministry faced in implementation of SDG target includes continuous change in the leadership within the Ministry. Of course, that meant different priorities with different PS’s and Ministers working together over the last couple of years, particularly for the period in question which is 2018 to 2023 Annual Reports.

High staff turnover due to the reform done at the Ministry. When the Public Service had the reform of the public service, the same rules apply to the civil servants in the Ministry of Education. Let me just talk very briefly about salary.

When they did the whole Job Evaluation Exercise, we have a Vice-Principal in say, Yasayasa Moala Secondary School. The Vice-Principal there is looking after 100 children. The Vice-Principal in Suva Grammar School is looking after 1,100 children, but they have the same salary. We must say that that JEE impacted so until to date, it is exactly still the same position.

In our Budget submission, we try to address this anomaly in the salary structure because it just does not work. You are looking after 100 children and getting the salary that you get, and you are looking after 1,100 children and you are getting the same salary as the person looking after the 100 children. There are so many examples of this right across the board.

The budgetary allocation which affected relevant activities aligned to SDG targets. The SDG targets - our indicators, are very good but we do not always prioritise those areas depending on our context. For example, we want the whole nation to have children who can use Artificial Intelligence (AI), but we do not have the money to buy smart phones for our children to use AI. So that disparity and the allocation of resources is always there. That is a challenge in terms of meeting our SDG target.

Pandemic and natural disaster which have significantly impacted on our budgetary allocations, as funds have often been used or diverted for rehabilitation programmes. I think this is the same right across the Civil Service. If there is a natural disaster, things will go there, budgetary allocations will get rediverted and we have no control over it.

I have always raised at the Ministry that we need to have some kind of Government policy that every Government that comes into power, there should be a mandate of some sort that you must build two schools during your governance and three hospitals or something. So, it is in the legislation or in the Constitution, I do not know which document, so that everyone is mandated to do these things. But instead, it seems like we get carried out with what is current when, in actual fact, we have an educated population. A lot of our problems would be minimised or taken care of, including the current drug problem. Thank you, honourable Members.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Madam Chairperson, through you, Madam PS, you have raised about building schools. Last year, I heard that the Ministry of Education had some plans to build some schools in this corridor. Is that still in place?

MS. S. KURULECA.- Madam Chairperson, through you, we still have plans. The Ministry of Education has spoken with the Ministry of Finance and they had advised that we get an audit of our schools infrastructure. So, currently, DFAT has agreed to that. We have an audit or a masterplan of the infrastructure of our schools from Suva to Nausori.

From that plan, then we will develop where the school will be constructed. We already have identified five sites, so we, sort of, started. We just wanted to build the schools, but with the advice from the Ministry of Finance, we are doing an audit of school infrastructure, then we will build.

In the next financial year, yes, we have put in a submission and, again, I ask honourable Members of this Committee to, please, support us in our submission for school construction. This is a need, we should be in front of the cliff and not at the bottom, looking for ways to get children educated.

I had made a comment in one of our meetings with my fellow PSs and I had said, maybe it will take a very gutsy government to do this, but if the politicians agreed to charge school fees in the city and towns. Build you rural areas, build the road, water and electricity, build the school. It is political suicide, it could be, but it could work. Build the rural area, do not charge school fees, everyone mucking around in the city in the squatter settlements is going to go back to the rural area. Build the agriculture, build the rural area, charge a fee for attending school in the city, then you will see everyone run away. So, that takes care of unemployment, takes care of our drug problem, dependency and rural-urban drift. May be that is what we need to do.

The other alternative that I have spoken about at the Ministry is, maybe we should have two days in one day, to half school days from 7.00 a.m. to 12.00 p.m. and then from 1.00 p.m. to 7.00 p.m. or something. Have all the buses operating, leads to employment, same school you use it for two different sets of classes so, yes, we just need to get creative if not building schools. It will be political suicide, but I do not know, until we try, I guess.

We have also started building a nation of very handout mentality and that needs to stop, if we are going to become the resilient Fijians that we all know we are. The resilient Fijians is based on respect, compassion and kindness for each other, because that is who we all are. We can sit here and disagree, but then when we go outside, we are going to have a baby mix, and everything is going to be fine. That seems to be lost in our younger generation, so we need to bring it back.

We are doing what we can, we will always ask for help, and I am not afraid to ask for help, I am not afraid of being vulnerable and I am also not afraid of saying that I do not know what I am doing and we need your help.

Madam Chairperson and honourable Members, we submit to you our responses to the 2018-2021 Annual Report.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Madam Chairperson, as we have heard and know, there is a real issue in regards to drugs, discipline, and respect for teachers. We have also heard and seen when we went to visit the Golden Age Home in Lautoka, how elderly people are left at the gate. Is there something that can be included in the curriculum so that we start to talk to the students when they are in school right from Class 1? Are there any plans to do that?

MS. S. KURULECA.- Yes, honourable Member, for the period being reported, the curriculum was based on knowledge based society. Knowledge based society is important, but we think of values-based society is more important. We have requested our Heads of Schools to continue to do the virtues and the values-based education. Also, from ECE to Class 4, to use the vernacular where they can because people seem to be forgetting their identity and the importance of respect.

Vernacular and Virtues Based Education are two things that we have continued to impress upon our Heads of Schools during our meetings, in our circulars, that they must continue to talk, do interventions, do activities with our children that encompasses the virtues that we want them to have. We do not have to do all in the 52 weeks because we have the virtues text book that we continue to use and we have Family Life Education.

If I may share the story of QVS, we have gone straight back to the older, older QVS old boys, like Mr. Boladuadua, at that age, and just ask him to tell a story of why QVS was set up to be the *Vuli ni Turaga*, this is about being future leaders of this country, and to play these recordings at morning tea, big and small lunch and in the afternoon, so people just hear consistent messaging about good behaviour and about the purpose of why you are here.

We all say that we are Christians. Are we also embodying the life of being a Christian? That project is underway or maybe I should not have let it out here, but we are excited. I am not ex-QVS but when I listen to the story when Mr. Boladuadua tells it, I want my children to go to QVS. But it is exactly that, going right back to the very basic - speaking in your vernacular, understanding your heritage from where you come, knowing values such as honesty and respect, and just being a good person really. You do not need to be the smartest person in the room, you just need to be a good person. We can disagree, that is fine, but just be a good person. So, just teaching our children that.

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- *Vinaka*, Madam, thank you very much for your very clear responses to our questions. I have two, my first question is on the Sanitary Pad Initiative. You mentioned that it is only for Year 8 girls upwards. Is there any specific reason why you have targeted only Year 8 girls because I know in the villages, we have very healthy girls who have their menstruation period in Year 6?

MS. S. KURULECA.- Thank you, Madam Chairperson. That was a policy that was in place at that time. I do note currently when there is a request from girls in lower classes, that is at the discretion of the Head of School. So, if we had budgeted 40 vouchers for school A but there are only 30 girls in school A, we do not limit if the lower classes request to the Head of School. The Head of School can use his/her discretion there. But generally speaking, this was based on the advice from the Ministry of Health and Medical Services as well on healthy girls who are mensurating around the age of 12 years and 13 years and, of course, budget implications as well. That is why we tried to keep it at Class 8, but when the request does come, it is at the Head of School's discretion.

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- Thank you. My second question is on the Ministry policy. What is the Ministry policy on posting on social media, the Ministry officials on Government decisions or directions that are taken? You would know where my question is coming from.

Following the recent approval of the Emoluments Report, I can see that there were a lot of teachers posting on *Facebook* about it. I know that now everyone has the freedom of expression to give their views and perspectives on issues they are not comfortable with but being a civil servant, it comes with maturity and a lot of wisdom as well when it comes to sharing those kinds of issues on social media. So, what is the Ministry's policy on that?

MS. S. KURULECA.- Thank you, Madam Chairperson. We have reactivated our Social Media Policy and in every other circular we have, again, reminded teachers that this is Civil Service Code of Conduct and Code of Ethics. We will be having our Heads of Schools meeting tomorrow where we are going to be giving out again this Code of Conduct, Code of Ethics and the Social Media Policy.

Like all civil servants, you are absolutely correct, Madam, we need to have a level of maturity and wisdom and discerning spirit on what they can and cannot publicly say, but we are also quite disappointed that some of these postings, we take it very seriously. We have people taking screenshots in our Ministry and we go back and try and find out who that person is, and a lot of them is fake accounts as well. So, that is another problem we are having.

When it is not a fake account, it is a genuine person, I personally call them and tell them, “Your door is the PS’s door. You come here and express to us here what you are upset about.” But to publicly do this mudslinging, for lack of a better word, is unacceptable. So, we have sent memos out to that effect as well. I think it needs a whole reminder right across the board for all civil servants that this is not the way to behave.

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- Honourable Members, is there any other question?

There being no more questions, I would like to sincerely thank, Madam Permanent Secretary, and her Team for the very informative and interesting discussion that we had this afternoon. I know my colleagues will agree with me that it has been a very interesting exchange.

The Committee has taken note of all the discussions, all the issues and challenges that have been raised by you and the Team. We will definitely take note of all those and it will help us in compiling our report, which we hope to table in the August sitting.

Madam PS, I hope that if there are any further questions from the Committee, the Ministry will be able to accommodate our request in that regard. Thank you again for availing yourselves to be at this meeting this afternoon and we wish you all the best in getting creative with all your initiatives and programmes in order to address the pertinent issues that are currently faced by the Ministry.

The Committee adjourned at 12.48 p.m.