



## **TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO UNIFIED TEACHERS' ASSOCIATION**

### **TEACHING TIME**

TTUTA is taken aback at recent attempts by the Minister of Education and others to focus the blame on teachers and their legitimate leave entitlements in relation to the issue of the loss of teaching time.

Some recent media reports have claimed that more and more teachers are absent from the classrooms, that teacher absenteeism appears to be on the rise and that teachers are using their leave entitlements to take time away from the classroom, especially in government schools. The Minister of Education at a recent media conference also spoke of teaching time being reduced to less than 150 days per year.

TTUTA notes that such assertions are normally made loosely, so that for example, vacation leave for students, which coincides with that for teachers, and public holidays enjoyed by students and all other citizens are included in this reduction of teaching time attributed to teachers.

Over and above that, however, it must be stressed that teachers have leave entitlements which have been enshrined in existing legislation or were negotiated by the Association over the years. These form part of the existing terms and conditions of service to teachers. It does not constitute an abuse of leave, merely to take leave.

In any case, even the information quoted from the Ministry of Education (MOE) does not support the assertion or insinuation that the vast majority of teachers abuse such entitlements. The one or two instances of abuse should be subjected to the normal disciplinary procedures of the MOE.

Teachers utilize their Sick Leave if they are sick and unable to perform their duties while Occasional Leave and Bank Time are entitlements which allow teachers to conduct their urgent personal business like every other citizen. Teachers like all other workers need to transact necessary financial arrangements concerning their lives and that of their families, which cannot be carried out after normal working hours or on weekends regardless of the increased use of modern technology.

Claims about teacher absenteeism also detract attention from the many factors which may lead to a loss of teaching time. There are many health and safety issues in the schools, including dilapidated buildings, faulty sewer and electrical systems, infestation by rats, bats, pigeons, fleas and other vermin and environmental hazards. The MOE has generally not treated with such issues with the required resources or urgency and this has led to massive losses in teaching time in many schools throughout the country.

There has been a failure to provide adequate security measures at schools which has led to attacks on school occupants. The MOE has failed to provide support and resources on a consistent basis to enable schools to cope with violent, indisciplined and disruptive elements among the student body. All this has meant a further loss of teaching time.

The MOE contributes to a loss of teaching time when it pulls teachers out of their classrooms for days or weeks at a time for training, without replacements, as witnessed in the training programmes run for the Continuous Assessment Component (CAC) over the past year. In addition, teacher vacancies are left unfilled, teachers who go on maternity leave are not replaced and there is no proper system of substitute teachers.

The MOE has been found wanting in providing proper funding, materials and resources in all schools, so that teachers would not be hamstrung in their teaching or have to use up valuable teaching time to raise funds or improvise resources or avoid unsafe, unhealthy and insecure conditions.

TTUTA reassures the national community that the overwhelming majority of teachers are hardworking and professional despite their difficult working conditions and all the assorted tribulations. They care for their students, protect, nurture and inspire them, foster values of honesty and creativity, enable them to develop their individual talents and engender community and national pride.

TTUTA calls on the Minister of Education and others to refrain from making teachers the scapegoats for the ills of the system. The focus should be on meaningful consultation towards removing the impediments to effective teaching and driving towards excellence in all schools.

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