



MINISTRY OF EDUCATION, ARTS AND CULTURE

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT BY HONOURABLE

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MINISTER

**ON THE EDUCATION SECTOR POLICY ON THE
PREVENTION AND MANAGEMENT OF LEARNER
PREGNANCY AND SAFETY AND SECURITY AT
SCHOOLS**

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Honourable Speaker, Honourable Members

The Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture in recent weeks witnessed various media statement related to the two matters above that have invited strong public debates. I will Honourable Speaker, Honourable Members dwell on these two subject to respond to concerns raised by the public and media. I will start of with the Education Sector Policy on the Prevention of learner pregnancy.

Honourable Speaker, Honourable Members

Ever since I became Minister of Education, Arts and Culture the ~~matter~~ policy on Learner Pregnancy in the Ministry has been attracting a lot ^{of} attention. The ministry has been bombarded with questions on the philosophy around the policy. There have been areas of misinterpretations and misconceptions as to what this policy seeks to achieve in the end. I therefore rise before you Honourable Speaker and Honourable Members, as Minister of Education Arts and Culture to provide perspectives on the policy in the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture by responding to the growing misconceptions on the policy.

Honourable Speaker, Honourable Members

As history has it, the policy on the Prevention and Management of Learner Pregnancy was approved by Cabinet in October 2009 for implementation by the then Ministry of Education. A Form Ed. 1/2010 circular dated 25 January 2010 highlighting important issues about the policy was issued to all schools with clear instructions to schools across the country to implement the policy.

The goal of the policy is to improve the **Prevention** and Management of learner pregnancy, with the ultimate aim of **decreasing the number of learner pregnancies** and increasing the number of learner-parents who complete their education. The policy is based on six guiding principles namely:

The Right to education of the girl child,

The need for prevention,

Information,

Respect

Support,

Respect for cultural and family values.

The policy is divided into two sections, namely:

Prevention and Management.

Honourable Speaker, Honourable Members

The provision of measures to **prevent** and reduce the number of learner pregnancies is a critical component of the policy. These measures include schools providing education on sexual and reproductive health, focusing on increasing learner responsibility by providing the environment where they are fully informed and have the information they need to make responsible decisions. Furthermore, a holistic life skills programme is being implemented in the schools, to which end the Ministry has created the positions of full time Life skills teachers, to provide learners with guidance and skills they need. Additional programmes to supplement Life skills has been encouraged wherever possible. Since 2013, Honourable Speaker, all Grade 8 learners have been required by the end of each academic year to complete the programme “My Future is my Choice”. A further aspect of prevention is the promotion of safe leisure activities by schools and the implementation of gender-specific support and mentoring for learners, to ensure female learners are empowered through the achievement of equal opportunities with male learners.

Additional to this Honourable Speaker, Honourable Members, as part of the policy, schools are encouraged to invite social and health workers to make regular presentations on reproductive health issues; endeavour to improve family and community involvement through various strategies; strive to ensure that the school environment is safe and learners are free from sexual harassment or abuse by learners, teachers or other staff and school staff should be positive role models to learners.

Honourable Speaker, Honourable Members

The Management section of the policy is necessary for where prevention measures fail and learners become pregnant. The guiding principle of the management section is to **support** pregnant learners, expectant fathers and learner-parents to combine continuation of their education with the responsibilities of parenthood without compromising the best interest of the infant or the learner. This process should be **collaborative** between the school, the pregnant learner, the expectant father and their families and should involve **participatory decision** making. Each situation is assessed and **evaluated individually**, with sensitivity to the learner's health, financial situation, options for child care, family support or lack of support, timing of delivery in relation to the school calendar and the needs of the new born child. The Management section

is further subdivided to address issues pertaining to female learners, male learners, the families of the affected learners, the school and the government. This section provides guidelines on health, education before and after giving birth, school assignments, breastfeeding, examinations and hostel boarders. To make this information more accessible to pregnant learners and learner-parents and the Ministry, in conjunction with the Legal Assistance Centre, has developed an information package to be given to the learner. This package serves as an informational guide, on all the aspects of pregnancy and birth, including prenatal care, adoption, maintenance, grants available, responsibilities with regard to school work and responsibilities of expectant father, to name but a few.

The policy focuses on the promotion of openness to support early disclosure so that learners are informed of the importance of ante-natal care – as we have seen the importance of the first 1 000 days of the life of a child.

Honourable Speaker, Honourable members

Let me for now dwell on the perceptions and misconceptions of the Policy since its inception. The Ministry had to deal and continues to deal with mounting misconceptions on the policy both from the members of the community and even members of this August house. These concerns have in many cases been stumbling blocks to the effective implementation of the policy, some of which are;

1. A pregnant learner may give birth at school which would upset other learners:

Hon Speaker, Honourable members, this concern has been addressed in the policy by providing for verification of the approximate due date, and for a leave of absence beginning 4 weeks before the anticipated due date (consistent with current labour law on this topic). Giving birth at school is actually more likely to happen in a situation where a schoolgirl has taken pains to hide the fact of the pregnancy.

Furthermore, the learner-parent is not forced to stay at school until the 4 weeks before her expected due date. The learner **may** stay in school until 4 weeks before her expected due date as certified by a healthcare provider or

choose to take a leave of absence earlier if this is advised by a health care provider on medical grounds, or if she feels unable or unwilling to continue attending to school at any time during her pregnancy . The learner must provide a health certificate if she stays in school passed 26 weeks (6 months).

The viewpoints of parents and caregivers of the learner and the school should be respected when considering how long a learner should continue at school. If no medical certificate is provided to verify the health of the learner, the school may require the learner to leave school at an early date. The policy supersedes any other rules on absence.

2. Seeing a pregnant learner in the school may encourage other learners to become pregnant, or have a detrimental effect on the moral standards of Namibia:

Honourable Speaker, Honourable members, at all regional consultations held with learners, an overwhelming majority of learners were not in support of this suggestion that seeing a pregnant learner would encourage them to fall pregnant.

Many felt that seeing a pregnant learner would have quite the opposite effect.

Several pregnant learners interviewed for this and other Namibian studies said that they would become actively involved in efforts to persuade other learners not to make the same mistake.

3. Learners return too soon after the birth of the child:

Honourable Speaker, Honourable Members, The policy clearly states that a learner **may not return** to school until such time as the health of the learner-parent and the health of the infant has been established and cleared by a health care worker. Further the policy states that a learner **may only return** to school when the care of the infant by a responsible adult has been arranged, and has been established and verified by a social worker (or the Principal if no social worker is readily available). The learner-parent and her parents, primary caretaker or guardian must also provide a signed statement with an exposition of how the infant will be cared for and an undertaking to maintain open communication with the school.

The learner **may choose to return** to school as soon as she can supply the specified documentation or she may

choose to take a longer period of leave for up to a maximum of one calendar year from the date on which she left school because of pregnancy. She may take longer leave, but then her place at the school will not be reserved. The learner however does have to indicate her intention to return to the school in order to reserve her place. The learner is also entitled to the option of transferring to another school, irrespective of age and without special authorisation, provided space is available.

4. A policy on learner pregnancy should be punitive to provide a deterrent

Honourable Speaker, Honourable members; this position has been advocated by many stakeholders, however, this position violates international law and the Namibian law as well. The treatment of pregnancy as a disciplinary offence undermines accessibility to education.

Furthermore, data shows that learner pregnancies are frequently the result of forced sex.

If a learner is asked to leave school because of her pregnancy, this amounts to punishing a schoolgirl for a situation over which she may have had no control.

Blaming the victim is not an acceptable policy provision.

In the area of School Safety and Security, the Ministry brings to the fore the fact that the recent developments and incident at St George's Diocesan College did not go unnoticed and it is by no means an acceptable occurrence to happen in our schools. Admittedly, the Ministry needs to critical matters of security and safety of learners and teachers in our schools. We are also cognisant of the fact that many children in our schools are exposed through internet and other electronic media on what happens everywhere in the world. Although ours is a small population of learners, the reality is that our learners are vulnerable, inquisitive, adventurous and thus open to external influences.

One of my priorities as per my Ministerial Declaration of Intent submitted to His Excellency Dr Hage G. Geingob is the provision of ICT in our schools. As we now enter an era of the Post 2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG'S), I see ICT as an important paradigm in the provision of education in the 21st century. This calls for clear guidelines on the usage of electronic devices meant for the purposes of teaching and learning in our schools. It is pleasing to note, Hon. Speaker, that many schools in Namibia have introduced E-Learning, I believe this is the way that education is going. However, this well- intended mode of education is sometimes abused, thus my call for schools to implement clear rules and guidelines on the usage of E-learning.

Honourable Speaker, Honourable members

Although no incident happened at the school in question the reality is that such violent threats to life cannot be allowed in our system of education.

The learners are in many cases exposed to programmes that they watch at home on television and on the internet. The incident at St George's College has awakened us to the extent where we re-commit to make schools a safe environment for both our teachers and learners. We also plead with parents to ensure that children are guided while at home and ensure that cellular phones, I-pads and all computers are used for educational purposes and not to be used irresponsibly, as irresponsible usage irreparable damage to our children.

The current Education Act review has taken this matter up through provision of guidelines in order to ensure that:

We establish a safe, disciplined and purposeful school environment dedicated to the improvement and maintenance of the quality of learning and teaching and to create a caring and nurturing environment for the learner to also develop into caring, honest and responsible adults.

The Ministry within the provision of this Act will strengthen the fact that;

Children must respect the dignity, person and property of teachers, learners and members of the public; and that a learner may not bring onto the school or hostel premises, or have in his possession any fire arm, bow and arrow, panga, knife or any other dangerous weapon.

Against the background stated above the Ministry will strengthen the security measures at all our schools to ensure maximum safety of all learners and teachers, through the building of fences and the provision of security services in schools. I also urge teachers to be vigilant at all times and address issues of bullying and excessive teasing before it escalates and leads to psychological and physical harm.

In conclusion, Mr Speaker, Honourable Members, I am proud to put it on record in this August House that Namibia is the only country in the SADC region to have developed this Inclusive and deliberate policy to allow re-entry of girl children in schools after pregnancy, something we need to celebrate as an achievement. This position has been taken in line with the Namibian Constitution that puts education as a Right and not a privilege and our President's clarion call that **"No Namibian must be left out."** The Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture takes learner pregnancy in a very serious light where the

perpetrators of pregnancy are men of all walks of life who prey on innocent and vulnerable girls. In as far as this Ministry is concerned it sees this policy as articulate, responsive and relevant to the situation in Namibia. We may not be the only sector that should solve this problem in the long run as we are aware that this requires a multi-disciplinary and multi-sectoral approach to resolve.

The Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture will endeavour to engage all stakeholders in order to effectively implement the policy. Equally we call on parents to ensure that while at home children are guided on what they watch on television and how they utilize electronic devices that are meant for the purpose of teaching and learning. The parents also have a major role to play in ~~the~~ assisting and complementing the efforts by the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture, equally all members of society have a prominent role to play in addressing matters of sexual exploitation of our girls at all critical and relevant platforms including this August House.

I thank you.