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News

It's not about GSAT

Illiterate students to stay in primary schools, says Holness

By Luke Douglas Observer writer
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Education Minister Andrew Holness has unveiled an ambitious plan to keep illiterate students in primary school, until they can read and write at the grade four level.



HOLNESS. part of the strategy is to shift parents' emphasis from the GSAT

Holness' plan will mean that illiterate students would not be able to sit the highly selective Grade Six Achievement Test (GSAT), the much sought-after ticket to a higher education and a better life.

"We have decided to re-focus the emphasis on ensuring that every child that leaves primary school, leaves literate and numerate," Holness said as he announced details of a new thrust to achieve national literacy, starting with the 2008-09 academic year.

But the umbrella Jamaica Teachers' Association (JTA), which represents the bulk of state-paid teachers, is concerned that the plan may not work because of the woeful lack of resources available to education.

"Until they provide the primary schools with the spaces and resources, I don't see how we will achieve the objective," JTA President Ena Barclay said in a comment to the Observer yesterday. "We should be focusing on making sure that when children come in at grade one, they are ready to learn," she added.

The Holness plan calls for primary level students to master the grade four literacy and numeracy tests in order to move from the primary to the secondary level. The grade four students will have a maximum of three chances to achieve mastery of the grade four test - in grades four, five and six.

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Students who have still not mastered the test by grade six would have to remain in primary school to achieve special intervention and would not be allowed to sit the Grade Six Achievement Test (GSAT), the education minister said.

This, he said, was part of the strategy to shift the emphasis of parents from the GSAT to their children achieving literacy by mastery of the grade four exam.

Holness who spoke at a round table discussion on literacy at the Ministry mid-week, noted that Jamaica was lagging behind Caribbean neighbours Barbados and Trinidad and Tobago which had literacy levels close to 100 per cent, compared with the low 80s here.

The good news, he said, was that mastery of the grade four exam had moved steadily from 43 per cent in 2001 to 75 in 2006, and the ministry had now set an objective of 85 per cent of primary and secondary students reading at or above their grade level by 2015.

But the minister did not immediately say how many illiterate students would be affected by his plan across the primary school system. Neither did he outline the expected impact on both primary and secondary schools with illiterate students being retained at the primary level.

JTA's Barclay insisted the plan would only be successful if more school spaces and more literacy teachers were provided. She called for more resources to be concentrated at grades one to three, so that the problem of illiteracy could be more manageable at grade four.

She noted that children identified by the grade one readiness inventory as in need of intervention, were not receiving the help needed for them to perform well, even when they reached grade four.

"We need to focus the resources because they are inadequate. Some schools do not have enough light and seats for children to sit and read," Barclay complained.

At the round table, National Literacy Co-ordinator Laurel Brent-Harris disclosed that the new plan would involve among other things, differentiated instruction, especially as it related to gender, interest, age and special needs. She said schools with a pattern of low performance would be targeted for interventions.

Teachers were being trained in diagnostic testing, and sensitivity to physiological differences between girls and boys, setting up resource rooms, and auditory and visual screening, she said.

However, Barclay described the more than 800 teachers being trained to identify learning difficulties as "a drop in the bucket", compared with what was required.

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