

# Early childhood care and education in Trinidad and Tobago

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The Ministry of Education in the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago has been mandated by the government to deliver universal early childhood care and education (ECCE) by 2015. A process to ensure access, equity and equality of school places for all children in this sector has therefore been initiated. Based on research that brain development between the ages of 1 and 7 is critical in the development of children to establish the platform for educational growth, the Ministry is aggressively pursuing this mandate.

Currently, there are 175 government and government-assisted ECCE centres operating in Trinidad and Tobago and these accommodate nearly 6,000 children. Additionally, there are 678 registered private ECCE centres that accommodate almost 18,000 children. Approximately 24,000 children aged 3–5 years are attending these centres out of a population of just over 34,000 children in that age group. This means that close to 12,000 students at this level are excluded from the formal and informal ECCE education sector. Children are deprived of an education because of financial means, geography, absence of centres and other factors. Since the Ministry is charged with the development and growth of all children, this situation has to be resolutely addressed.

Because the majority of providers and owners in the ECCE sector, while registered with the Ministry of Education, are not strictly supervised by the Ministry, there is great disparity in the standards of operations (curriculum and otherwise) and educational qualifications of the teachers. Safety and health factors are also not routinely scrutinised. To facilitate higher standards of operations, the Ministry is actively seeking partnerships with private providers and operators. In this regard, it held two major consultations in Trinidad with these owners and providers to determine the level of partnerships required with them (another consultation is planned for Tobago). Arising from these two consultations, the Ministry has developed several initial models for partnerships, and further dialogue will continue. It is the Ministry's ambition to enter into partnership with 500 private owners and providers over the next year.

The Ministry also intends to convert a number of underpopulated (less than 70 per cent capacity) primary schools into ECCE centres. Additionally, it has embarked on the construction of 50 ECCE centres with the assistance of the Inter-American Development Bank to accommodate almost 3,000 students. It is also the Ministry's intention to construct another 200 ECCE centres. Through the construction and partnership process, it expects to achieve universal ECCE education by 2015.

As a result of this initiative, almost 3,000 ECCE teachers will be required over the next three years. The Ministry is working with all providers (universities and others) to admit and train the number of teachers needed. With the assistance of the Accreditation Council of Trinidad and Tobago, agreement by all providers has been reached on a standard ECCE Certificate programme offered to applicants; standardisation of the BEd ECCE and BEd Primary is now in progress. These providers are offering courses in Certificate, Diploma and Degree qualifications. Initial admission targets are being realised, and more public communication of the opportunities in the sector is on the agenda. The Ministry is addressing the terms and conditions of teachers in ECCE as well as the implications of formalising this sector; these last two matters require significant consideration as universal ECCE is pursued.

The Ministry of Education is determined to achieve its ECCE mandate and is engaged in rigorous dialogue and discussion with relevant parties to ensure success in this initiative.

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