



Ministerial Statement

To The House of Assembly

By

The Hon. Leah K. Scott, MP, JP

Junior Minister, Ministry of Education and Economic Development

Autism Awareness

Friday May 30th, 2014

Mr. Speaker,

On Wednesday, April 2, 2014 my Honourable Colleague, Trevor Moniz, Acting Minister of Education, read the official United Nations declaration to mark the seventh annual World Autism Awareness Day. That day also marked the launch of Autism Awareness Month in Bermuda.

Mr. Speaker,

You may be aware that Autism Spectrum Disorder, or "ASD", involves a group of different symptoms that range from impaired communication and social interaction to distinctive repetitive behaviours. However, I am pleased to advise that Bermuda, as a community, continues to make great strides in increasing autism awareness.

Mr. Speaker,

I had the privilege of attending two events recently that clearly reflected the concerted efforts that our service providers, the Department of Education, and our schools are making to ensure that the needs of our children, who are diagnosed with ASD, are being addressed.

The first event, **Mr. Speaker**, was an autism training workshop hosted by the Child Development Programme (CDP on, March 27th 2014. The training was conducted by Dr. Cheryl Klaiman, Assistant Professor in the Division of Autism and Related Disorders within the Department of Pediatrics at Emory University School of Medicine. One of the key objectives of the workshop was to train the staff at CDP to develop an on island diagnosis for our children who may be autistic, as presently, **Mr. Speaker**, all children in Bermuda under the age of four years who show signs of ASD must be sent overseas to be diagnosed.

It is anticipated that the CDP will collaborate with the overseas agency - Communication Crossroads so that our children are able to benefit from overseas ASD research programmes. This agency specializes in speech and language programmes designed to serve children with ASD and related social learning; and is strongly committed to providing educational workshops for educators, service providers, and administrators who are seeking guidelines for implementing therapeutic/educational plans that are grounded in current research. The training workshop was very informative and certainly highlighted the challenge Bermuda faces to obtain a proper diagnosis of autism.

Mr. Speaker,

You may be aware that it was back in September 2011 that the West Pembroke School with the support of the Department of Education opened their first autism classroom, taking the initial step to accommodate children with autism into mainstream education. So it was an honor for me to be given the privilege of opening the Sensory Garden created by the Autism Spectrum Disorder Department at the West Pembroke Primary School. The Sensory Garden provides the students with an exterior location to receive sensory input and promote social interaction with other students. The West Pembroke students, along with their teachers, Miss Freda Trimm, and Miss Zola French, and community volunteers and donors, worked for several months to complete the project located in the courtyard area at the school.

Mr. Speaker, this event clearly demonstrated the ongoing support and commitment that the school has to children with ASD. In fact, **Mr. Speaker,** the entire ceremony was conducted by children who are enrolled in the ASD Programme and included Adonte Martin as the Master of Ceremonies, while Stephen DeShields gave the Welcome. The Opening prayer was delivered by Elon Wainwright, with a vocal performance given by Michelle Spencer, who sang, "I Believe I Can Fly". The final musical selection was performed by Miss Dawn Fubler, the Art and PE Teacher and Adonte Martin performing drum solos. The ceremony was closed out by Zycieo Glasford who gave special thanks to attendees and invited guests. **Mr. Speaker,** the ceremony was absolutely outstanding.

Mr. Speaker,

In addition to the ASD Programme at West Pembroke School, you may recall that the Prospect Primary School and Paget Primary School have also established ASD

Programmes in September 2012 and September 2013. In September 2014, the Department of Education will establish a further two ASD programmes at the Dellwood Middle School and the Dame Marjorie Bean Hope Academy. The ASD programme at the Dellwood Middle School is intended to address the needs of those students who are transitioning from the primary to middle school, while the ASD programme at the Dame Marjorie Bean Hope Academy will provide a more specialised service to those students with severe and profound exceptionalities on the autism spectrum.

Mr. Speaker, currently, the Department serves 21 students in its ASD programmes. An additional 12 students will now be able to be served with the establishment of the two new ASD programmes, which will make for a total of 33 students enrolled in ASD programmes.

Mr. Speaker, according to statistics compiled by the U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention, (CDC), there are approximately 1 in 68 American children on the autism spectrum. This represents a ten-fold prevalence in 40 years. Based on preliminary data compiled here in Bermuda, there are approximately 50 students on the island with some aspect of ASD. With the numbers steadily increasing, we can project that roughly 1 in every 54 students will be diagnosed with ASD. As such, early intervention is key with the most important, critical years for assessment taking place from birth to age five.

Mr. Speaker,

In closing, I am pleased to report that in Bermuda, we are taking the necessary steps to assist our children in obtaining an accurate diagnosis of ASD. The ongoing efforts of the Ministry, and particularly our educators at the Child Development

Programme, West Pembroke School, Prospect Primary School and Paget Primary School in continuing to promote autism awareness should be highly lauded.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.