

TTUTA ON TUESDAY

School health, safety everybody's business

NEWSDAY

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TTUTA

PRINCIPALS AND teachers are to a large extent under the microscope of public scrutiny. This is exacerbated especially when something negative happens involving the nation's schoolchildren.

When children attain excellence, whether such excellence be academic or otherwise, they and even their parents receive all the plaudits for the sacrifice they made to achieve. Nary a mention is made of the principal and teachers. It is as though the children succeeded in a vacuum with little or no input from the school.

How many times we see the top 200 SEA students being honoured, but not a mention of their teachers and principals? Island scholarship winners decorate the media, but who cares about the work their schools put in? However, God forbid that a child should get injured on the compound, or children are involved in a street brawl, or any other misdemeanour, then the chorus is always where were the principals and teachers?

The National Primary Schools Principals Association (Napsa) recognises the onerous responsibilities placed on its members and by extension the teachers in our schools. According to Section 27, Subsection (a) of the Education Act (1966), "the principal is responsible for the day-to-day management of the school including...the safety and security of the pupils."

This subsection is the overarching principle on which all the other functions of the principal are based. The principal can from time to time designate teachers to assist in developing and implementing systems to ensure the safety and security of the pupils on the school compound.

However, Napspa believes subsection (a) must be considered in the context of the hours of work for principals and teachers, which in most primary schools are from 8.30 am to 3 pm. It must also be noted that when one speaks to safety and security, the health of the pupils must also be factored in.

Against the backdrop of two serious incidents involving primary school pupils in term 1 2019-2020, two critical issues arise: the responsibility of the principal and teachers outside of their working hours and whether they should be dealing with situations they are not trained to deal with.

In the first instance where the boy suffered an injury to his head, it must be noted that this incident occurred before the actual start of the school day when principals and teachers are not legally obligated to be on the compound. Despite this, Napspa is mindful that because of how parents work, the need may arise to drop off children at school before the start of the school day and collect them after the school day has ended.

Napspa is also fully cognisant of the fact that some of our principals and teachers also have children who may be attending other schools and whom they would need to drop off and collect while inconveniencing the authorities of those schools.

While Napspa commiserated with the parents, the pupil, and by extension the school community, the association wishes to use this forum to reiterate its call for the implementation of a monitor system in primary schools. The time is long past for all stakeholders inclusive of the Ministry of Education, Napspa, TTUTA, and the NPTA to come together in the interest of the welfare of children.

These monitors can come from among the parent body of the schools, or even retired law enforcement officers who live in the community. Their role would be to complement the principal and teachers in the supervision of pupils before and after school and during the break and lunch periods.

The second and more tragic incident resulted in the death of a pupil, after he became sick at school. While all the necessary protocols

were followed the inordinate delay in the ambulance getting to the compound may have contributed to the child's early demise.

While principals and teachers have taken injured/sick pupils for medical attention in their personal vehicles, Napsa is of the opinion that if trained medical personnel were on the compound, the child's death may have been avoided. Medical assistance would have been rendered on the spot, while awaiting the arrival of the ambulance.

The association is therefore calling on the ministry to seriously consider having at least one nurse on every school compound to deal with such emergencies. While this idea may seem farfetched to some, it is the prudent step to take as we move towards developed nation status.

Napsa recognises that there is a cost attached to these proposals. But this association holds the view that our children's health and safety cannot be measured in monetary terms. While we compliment the ministry in not apportioning blame to the school in both instances, we believe these incidents are a wake-up call to all stakeholders and that there is urgent need to address the health and safety of our children in a holistic manner. Nothing less will suffice.