

**Ministerial Statement by the
Minister of Education
The Honourable Dame Jennifer Smith DBE, JP, DHumL, MP
Friday 10 June 2011**

Mr. Speaker, three months ago, during the Budget debate, I set out the focus and direction of the Ministry of Education for the forthcoming year.

I outlined the operational and procedural changes that had already been made to improve financial efficiency and I emphasised that everyone should understand that students are the sole reason for the existence of the Ministry.

As a reminder, Bermuda's public school system has mandated class sizes, an enviable teacher/student ratio of 1 to 15; and the services of paraprofessionals. In light of the economic climate, it certainly makes sense to review staffing levels – something that I gave notice would be done.

Mr. Speaker, I also stated that the role, definition and placement of paraprofessionals would be reviewed to ensure appropriate utilisation.

So far, it appears that we have more para-professionals than required. Accordingly we gave notice - as required. **Mr. Speaker**, parents can rest assured that we will continue to meet identified needs.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry's adherence to its Collective Bargaining Agreement with the Bermuda Union of Teachers should hardly be cause for alarm - nor should it be used to play politics.

The decision announced affects teachers, para-professionals and educational therapist assistants whose contracts expire this term; or who are not qualified and/or not registered with the Bermuda Educators Council; a total of 12 teachers and 30 paraprofessionals and educational therapist assistants are affected.

Some have questioned the decision to release these individuals, but I remind members that the Bermuda Educators Council Act 2002 Section (4) (1) states that: ***“.....a person shall not take up any employment as an educator unless he is registered under this Act.”***

The Act further states that - ***“a person is a qualified educator – (a) where such person is a teacher, or a principal of a school, if – (i) he holds a university degree or equivalent qualification granted by an institution recognized by the Council; and (ii) he has successfully completed a course of initial training for teachers in schools at an institution recognized by the Council.***

And – (b) ***“where such person is a para-professional, if – (i) he holds an associate degree or equivalent qualification granted by an institution recognized by the Council; and (ii) he has successfully completed a course of training appropriate for para-professionals at an institution recognized by the Council.***

Mr. Speaker, not only is this a matter of law, but imagine what would have been said if we condoned putting unqualified persons in our classrooms.

This might be an appropriate point to inform Members that - of course - there is a procedure for unqualified persons to qualify to be considered for employment in our schools.

In addition, Section 5 (1) of the Bermuda Educators Act establishes that *“The Minister acting on the advice of the Exemption Committee, on being satisfied that there is a need in schools in Bermuda for persons who possess knowledge of, and skills in, particular subjects taught at schools, may by order exempt..... – (a) a specified person; or (b) persons falling within specified classes; who possess such knowledge and skills.*

So there is an avenue – if needed – for Principals to make application on behalf of any individual in their school with a particular skill that is required in that school, to the Exemption Committee, who then make a recommendation to the Minister.

In such cases, the Minister is guided by the advice of the Exemption Committee.

Mr. Speaker, during the budget debate Members will have noted the reduced budgets for all schools.

In the case of Aided Schools, Principals work together with their Boards to meet agreed targets. Where necessary, the Ministry will work with schools to reassign qualified teachers to other vacancies within the system.

Mr. Speaker, you may wonder why I have painstakingly set out the legislative and collective bargaining framework for teachers and paraprofessionals once again.

I think it is important, in light of some of the alarmist and irresponsible statements that have been made recently, to acknowledge that the decisions taken in Education should not have come as a surprise - they were signalled in March.

To be clear, persons affected include:

- para-professionals on one year contracts – a total of 30;
- persons who are unqualified and unregistered – a total of 12;
- a group of qualified and certified teachers on temporary assignment or on a one year contract - a total of 9 Bermudian teachers.

For information purposes, twenty posts have been eliminated at the Berkeley Institute and twenty-six posts at Cedarbridge Academy.

The total number of posts lost is ninety-six out of a total of one-hundred and thirty para-professional and one thousand, two-hundred and forty-one teaching posts.

Mr. Speaker, when considering whether our students will be well served, I point to the teacher student ratio in our schools - at the PreSchool level it is **nine to one**, at the Primary level, it is **fifteen to one**, Middle School level, **seventeen to one** and at the Senior level, **twenty to one**.

Clearly, classrooms will not be left bereft.

Mr. Speaker, I must say 'Thank You' to all those who have expressed support for cuts within the Ministry of Education. I had previously given an undertaking to advise the public of these cuts by the end of June.

The education of our children is serious business and ensuring that the public maintains and gains confidence in our public system is equally important.

We remain unequivocal in our commitment to improving Bermuda's educational system. The decisions we are making are to facilitate teaching and learning.

Yes, we can do more with less – the people in Education demonstrate this every day.

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