

Statement to the House of Parliament
Fourth Meeting of the 2025/26 Session

Early Childhood Care and Education and the Early Intervention Programme

By the Honourable Rolston Anglin, JP, MP
Minister for Finance and Economic Development &
Education & Training

06th March 2026

Mister Speaker,

I rise to provide this Honourable House with a comprehensive update on the Ministry of Education and Training's work in Early Childhood Care and Education and the Early Intervention Programme — work that sits at the very foundation of our education system and, indeed, the long-term social and economic wellbeing of our Islands.

Children's brains are built, moment by moment, as they interact with their environments. In the first few years of life, more than one million neural connections are formed each second – a pace never repeated again. The quality of a child's early experiences makes a critical difference as their brains develop, providing either strong or weak foundations for learning, health and behaviour throughout life.

Raising standards across our schools does not begin at primary level. It begins in the earliest months and years of life. Research consistently demonstrates that the first five years are critical for brain development. During this period, children develop the language, cognitive flexibility,

emotional regulation and social competence that underpin future academic success.

When children enter Reception ready to learn — able to listen, communicate, regulate their emotions and engage with early literacy and numeracy — they are significantly more likely to read on time, remain engaged in school and progress successfully through secondary education. Conversely, when developmental delays are not identified and addressed early, learning gaps widen, behavioural challenges increase and intervention becomes more complex and more costly.

High-performing education systems across the world are clear on one principle: equity begins in the early years. They invest in strong early childhood provision, systematic screening, qualified practitioners and responsive early intervention services. That is the direction in which we continue to move.

Over the past year, the Ministry has taken deliberate and structured steps to strengthen quality across all registered early childhood settings.

We have delivered structured professional development for centre leaders and practitioners to enhance classroom practice, strengthen supervision, and embed inclusive approaches within daily teaching. Practitioners are being supported to better understand child development, early language acquisition and differentiated strategies for children with emerging or identified additional needs.

Health and safety requirements have also been reinforced, ensuring that early childhood environments remain safe, nurturing and compliant. A child cannot thrive academically if they do not feel secure and supported. Quality care and safeguarding remain fundamental.

All registered settings now operate within a three-year re-registration cycle. Site visits are recorded through the Ministry's digital system, strengthening oversight, transparency and consistency across the sector. This structured approach to quality assurance supports continuous

improvement and aligns our practice more closely with international standards.

In addition to strengthening quality, we have prioritised early identification.

The Ages and Stages Questionnaire is now implemented across the sector, including within the Smart Start programme. This parent-completed developmental screening tool empowers families while supporting practitioners to identify potential concerns at an earlier stage. Where needs are identified, structured learning support plans are developed and implemented within the early childhood setting to ensure timely intervention.

For children requiring more targeted support, the Early Intervention Programme provides multidisciplinary services from birth to five years of age.

Children are referred through defined pathways and receive comprehensive developmental assessments covering communication, cognition, motor development and social-emotional growth. Following assessment, support may include specialist teachers, speech and language therapists and occupational therapists. Services are delivered within homes and early childhood centres so that strategies are embedded within daily routines — where children learn best.

Parents remain central partners throughout the process. Early intervention is most effective when families are equipped, informed and supported.

As children approach Reception, structured transition planning supports collaboration between families and primary schools. This ensures that children enter the school system with their needs identified and appropriate supports in place, reducing the risk of longer-term learning gaps.

Mister Speaker, we are proud of the dedication and professionalism of the Early Intervention team. They are committed, skilled and deeply invested in the progress of the children they serve.

However, we must also be candid: the Early Intervention Programme now requires strengthening.

Demand for services continues to grow. Children who require support benefit most from consistent and, at times, more frequent intervention. To maximise impact, we must ensure the programme has the capacity, structure and resources necessary to meet this demand effectively.

Accordingly, the Ministry intends to undertake a formal evaluation of the Early Intervention Programme. This evaluation will examine programme effectiveness, service frequency, referral timelines, measurable child outcomes and longer-term impact as children transition into primary school. It will allow us to identify capacity gaps and determine how best to expand or restructure services to increase reach and improve developmental progress.

Strengthening the programme will include consideration of:

- Expanded specialist capacity to reduce waiting times and increase service frequency;
- Clear service delivery standards to ensure consistency and equity of provision;
- Improved data tracking systems to measure developmental progress over time; and
- Closer integration between early intervention, nursery, Reception and primary services.

This is not, I repeat for emphasis Mr. Speaker this is not a reflection of any shortcoming in staff — it is a recognition that strong teams require strong systems around them. Further it reflects that this unit is greatly understaffed and under-resourced and needs to be rebuilt. If we are

serious about early intervention, we must ensure the structure is as strong as the commitment of those delivering it.

Mister Speaker, it is equally important to recognise the central role of nursery and Reception classes within our government schools and the broader early childhood sector.

Nursery and Reception are not simply preparatory years. They are structured learning environments where children develop early literacy, number sense, vocabulary, social confidence and emotional regulation. These years lay the groundwork for reading fluency, numeracy development and classroom engagement.

For the public, the message is straightforward:

- If we want improved reading and math outcomes, we must prioritise early language development.
- If we want improved attendance and behaviour in later years, we must build social-emotional competence early.
- If we want to close achievement gaps, we must intervene before they widen.

Quality and early intervention must also be matched by equitable access.

Through the Early Childhood Assistance Programme, eligible families receive financial support in the year prior to Reception, reducing cost barriers at a critical stage and increasing participation in structured early learning.

Mister Speaker, this Government has significantly strengthened that support. ECAP funding was forecast at approximately CI\$910 thousand in 2025. In the 2026 and 2027 budget, CI\$2.1 million has been allocated each year — more than doubling the programme's annual funding and expanding its reach.

Effective 1 April, the monthly ECAP rates will increase from CI\$541 to CI\$625 for Basic assistance and from CI\$812 to CI\$937 for Supplementary assistance. Basic support will continue to cover 50 per cent of the average monthly fee, and Supplementary support will cover 75 per cent. This standardized structure provides clarity, consistency and fairness. This is a key cost of living initiative contained in the robust 2026-27 budget. This directly attacks an all of us campaigned on, addressing cost of living! This direct intervention is the most impactful way any government can attack cost of living, directly assisting Caymanian families in most need in our community! The additional benefit is that Caymanian families are being assisted during the most crucial stage of their children's educational journey.

In line with the most recent Strategic Policy Statement and approved budget priorities, several early years initiatives are underway, including:

- Expansion of nursery provision in areas of population growth
- Continued strengthening of financial assistance to families through ECAP;
- Development of a Revised National Early Childhood Framework to modernise oversight, accountability and workforce standards;
- Strengthening of screening and referral pathways to reduce delays in support; and
- A review of funding arrangements to ensure resources are aligned with identified need, particularly for children requiring additional services.

The Revised National Early Childhood Framework will update legislative provisions where necessary, clarify governance and sector responsibilities, strengthen quality standards, and establish clearer qualification expectations and professional pathways for early years practitioners. High-performing systems invest in their workforce — ensuring practitioners are trained, supported and professionally recognised.

We are also exploring enhanced data systems that will allow us to track developmental progress from early years into primary education. Measuring impact is essential if policy decisions are to be evidence-based and resources directed effectively.

The Ministry of Education will develop a close working relationship with the Ministry of Health, after all babies are born in hospitals. Therefore, health practitioners are the first professionals to interact with our children. All children have a mandatory vaccine program at certain ages. I will be implementing a system of measuring key developmental milestones at various ages for children. It will mandatory for parents and/or early child care health or education professionals to report any abnormal findings relating to these key milestone measures. This shall be recorded in the child's education record housed in the Department of Education Services. Once reported these findings will be formally assessed. There will be a penalty regime for not reporting any suspected adverse findings. Please note that a parent and/or healthcare and/or education professional can apply to have any abnormal finding removed from the child's education record should they prove to not be found by a formal assessment or overcome with age as the child develops.

Mister Speaker, strengthening early childhood care, nursery provision and early intervention is not simply an operational improvement. It is a strategic investment in national outcomes.

By improving quality, expanding access, strengthening early intervention and aligning resources with need, we reduce learning gaps before they widen. We support families at critical stages. And we build a stronger, more resilient education system.

The work is ongoing and will continue in a structured, evidence-based manner. But the direction is clear: sustained commitment to the earliest years will shape the future of our schools and our country.

Because when we get the first five years right, everything that follows becomes stronger.

I thank this Honourable House.

Approved
J. J. Miller
4/3/26