



SPEECH

**His Excellency Mr Dharambeer Gokhool G.C.S.K.,
President of the Republic of Mauritius**

**EVENT: 5TH UCMAS MAURITIUS NATIONAL MENTAL MATH
COMPETITION**

VENUE: COTE D'OR NATIONAL SPORTS COMPLEX

DATE: 06 SEPTEMBER 2026

TIME: 13:30 HOURS

Her Excellency Mrs Aparna Ganesan, Deputy High Commissioner of India;

Mrs Krishna Desai, Founder and Managing Director of the Universal Concept of Mental Arithmetic System (UCMAS) - Mauritius;

Distinguished guests;

Parents and families;

Teachers and instructors;

And, most importantly, my dear children,

Good afternoon.

Thank you for your invitation and warm welcome.

It is a great pleasure for me to be with you today at the 5th UCMAS Mauritius National Mental Math Competition.

Let me begin by thanking Mrs Krishna Desai and the entire UCMAS Mauritius team for inviting me to share this special occasion with you.

Recently, I had the opportunity to attend the Prize Giving Ceremony of the Mathematics Video Competition organised by the Mauritius Institute of Education.

The theme, “Celebrating Mathematics through History and Culture,” encouraged young learners to see mathematics not simply as a subject taught in the classroom and assessed through examinations, but as a discipline which has its roots going back to the early days of human civilisation.

But what struck me most was the exuberance and creativity displayed by the young minds in their quest for knowledge, linking quantitative science to social sciences.

Clearly demonstrating that the future vision of education must be more integrated, holistic and interdisciplinary. And that we can learn a lot from our younger generation.

That event made me reflect on something more profound.

How far is the negative impression created by mainstream and social media platforms that our youth have become prisoners of drugs, digital addiction and other social evils and that they have lost interest in constructive activities?

How far is this a true reflection of the potential in our youth?

Alongside these challenges, there is another reality.

When I visit schools and meet young people across Mauritius I see another reality.

During the week I visited and interacted with children of two Primary schools. One school, Sir Pierre Dalais Primary GS, held an impressive STEM exhibition which dealt with all the contemporary challenges like Food security, Biodiversity, Circular economy, Renewable energy.

Should we not, as a responsible society, also bring to public attention the collective efforts of these children? Or is good news no news?

Little things can make big differences. A journey of a thousand miles begins with a few single steps.

I understand that over 200 young participants, from around 50 schools across Mauritius, supported by their teachers and parents, have taken part in this year's competition, with some as young as four and a half years old - all enrolled in the UCMAS Mental Arithmetic Programme.

When we speak about mental mathematics, we naturally think about numbers, calculations and getting the right answer.

But the real value of an exercise such as this goes beyond mathematics.

It is about concentration, memory, reasoning, mental agility, speed and accuracy - comparable to a game of chess, which I also encourage.

It is also about discovering that, with practice, something that seemed difficult yesterday can become possible today.

Today, you have put these abilities to the test through visual, listening and flash competitions, by thinking quickly, calculating mentally and remaining focused under pressure.

These are qualities that will serve you well throughout your lives.

And there is another lesson I hope you will take from today.

In a competition, it is natural to look at the person beside you and want to be faster or better.

But your most important competition is with yourself.

When something is difficult, do not say, “I cannot do it.” Say instead, “I cannot do it yet, but I shall continue trying until I can do it.”

There is a big difference: the first closes the door; the second keeps it open.

This attitude builds patience and resilience-two qualities so essential to face the challenges of life.

So, let me commend all our young participants for their enthusiasm, discipline and determination.

I also commend UCMAS Mauritius and, of course, the parents, whose encouragement and support are so important in helping our children develop their abilities and confidence.

You will not always be first. You will make mistakes. Sometimes you will be disappointed.

That is part of learning and growing up too.

What matters is that we learn from the experience, try again and keep moving forward. Keep improving.

Growing Up and Preparing for a Changing World

I want to take this opportunity to connect UCMAS Mental Arithmetic Programme to a contemporary challenge being faced by most societies:

The place of technology in their lives.

Our children are growing up in a digital world. Technology can educate, connect and create, and we should not treat it as the enemy.

But we must also ask what happens when screens begin to crowd out the other experiences children need - sleep, physical activity, reading, play, conversation, creativity and face-to-face relationships.

The World Health Organization and the American Academy of Pediatrics, for instance, both emphasise the importance of balancing screen time with active play, adequate sleep, reading, family interaction and other essential non-screen activities.

And this is where digital parenting becomes important.

As parents and educators, our responsibility is not simply to ask, “How much screen time is my child having?”

It is also to ask: What is the screen replacing?

Is there still time to put the phone away and talk? Time to play outside?

Time to build, draw, solve a puzzle or simply imagine? Time to interact with other people?

And this applies to us adults too.

Children learn not only from what we tell them, but from what they see us do.

Our own relationship with our phones and devices is therefore part of the example we set.

Our goal must not be to remove technology from our children’s lives, but to ensure that technology does not take childhood out of their lives.

And this is particularly important as we enter an age of artificial intelligence and rapid technological change.

A computer can calculate faster than any human being. AI can process enormous amounts of information in seconds.

But technology does not remove the need for human beings to think, question, reason, imagine, create, collaborate and make responsible choices.

We are endowed with the most powerful computer which resides in our brain.

Having been an educator myself for almost fifty years, I can tell you that education is not simply about filling a child's mind with information.

It is about helping that child learn how to think, how to learn and how to grow.

**Remember the words of the Irish poet William Butler Yeats:
"Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire."**

That is precisely what today's competition is doing

UCMAS: Creating Opportunities for Our Children

I am pleased to see how UCMAS Mauritius has developed since its establishment in 2021.

The growing participation in this national competition reflects the interest and enthusiasm of our young people.

I also note that UCMAS Mauritius forms part of a much wider international network, with UCMAS centres and representatives across the world.

This gives our children opportunities to develop their abilities here in Mauritius, while also testing themselves and competing alongside children from other countries.

And our Mauritian children have already made their mark, winning a Bronze Medal at the UCMAS World Cup 2023 in Malaysia, while one of our students, Hrehaan Jaiden Bundhun, was named second runner-up in his category at the international competition.

I am equally pleased to note that the UCMAS Little Champs programme, launched in collaboration with the MBC last year, has provided another platform for our children to showcase their abilities to a wider audience.

And I believe these initiatives are valuable for another reason.

At a time of poly-crisis, Mauritius has an important lesson to share:

Our children are not simply a reflection of the challenges we face; they are part of the promise and potential of what we can become.

This is a picture of our young people that we should recognise, nurture and celebrate.

The Role of Parents and Educators

I extend my sincere appreciation to parents, teachers and instructors for encouraging our children, and perhaps more than once, telling them:

“Try again. You can do it.”

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Mauritius has always understood that our greatest asset is our people.

Our most important investment must therefore be an investment in our children and young people.

Let me address our Young Friends directly:

If you win, enjoy your achievement. If you do not, do not be discouraged.

Take what you have learnt today and come back stronger.

Above all, keep learning, keep questioning and keep challenging yourselves.

Read. Play. Create. Explore. Spend time with people.

And use technology as a tool - but not as a substitute for living, learning and connecting.

Conclusion

Ladies and gentlemen,

With these words, allow me to warmly congratulate every participant in this 5th UCMAS Mauritius National Mental Math Competition once again.

My appreciation goes to the parents, teachers, instructors and organisers who have made this possible, and to Mrs Krishna Desai and the UCMAS Mauritius team.

I hope this competition will continue to grow and reach many more children across Mauritius, and that our young people will continue to make their mark, both nationally and internationally.

I wish you success in all your future endeavours.

And I look forward to our continued efforts, together, in shaping the Mauritius we want - As One People, As One Nation.

Merci et bonne continuation. Thank you.