



The following speech was presented by the Minister of Education, Youth and Culture, the Honourable Maxine Henry-Wilson, to the 40th annual conference of the Jamaica Teachers' Association

It almost seems unimaginable that a year has gone by since we last met in a session like this. That this is so, could almost lead us into a state of panic, anxious to determine what we have accomplished in that twelve-month period between then and now. As members of the JTA, you have faced the issue squarely, as is evident from the theme under which this conference has been convened. You are using this as an opportunity to reflect, evaluate and reposition.

Over the past year, no doubt, much has been accomplished both in your personal and professional development. This has included the relationships among the stakeholders in education. For me, one of the significant achievements of this past year has been the high level of cooperation and collaboration that has characterised the relationship between the MOEYC and the JTA. No one could claim that this constituted either “wimpishness” or cronyism. Rather it was a mature recognition that we have shared interests and must therefore, forge common approaches.

So, whether it was a discussion on the performance appraisal of teachers or the state of a school plant; whether it was the championing of a claim by a member of the teaching cohort or the larger strategic issue of the work of the task force appointed by the Prime Minister, while ably representing the cause of the members, the overriding principle which governed the discussion between the two parties and which eventually guided our decision that was ultimately taken, was what would redound to the best interest of education and of our charges in the system.

This “paramountcy” given to the nation’s interest was further reflected in the decision by the JTA to participate in the Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of Jamaica and the Joint Confederation of Trade Unions. This was in recognition of the fact that as a nation, the economic options that confront us must mean foregoing immediate benefits to ensure the viability of the future. We were doing what our brothers and sisters in the public sector of Caribbean countries had done previously. It was a big step worthy of big people such as those who constitute the membership of the JTA.

Another dominant feature of the past year was the range and scope of the comments, which were made on the education sector. I am sure you must have heard me elsewhere opining that for me, these comments — while not always either accurate or complimentary — could have had positive impact and implications.

Ultimately, they reflected a constructive energy emanating from a wider public that was concerned about where our society is going and how we can get there as a collective and cohesive people working together for the greater good of our children and our future.

The underlying message to me was, a return to the principle that education was, indeed, that vehicle to improve the lot of the average Jamaican and lead to the development of that better quality of life for all. The public was presenting a challenge to us based on their conviction that education had to once again assume the centrality it merited not only in terms of what happened

in the classroom but equally in the wider society. They were also challenging us to lead the mission, while simultaneously they seemed to pledge support of one kind or the other to attaining this mission. It is a time, I believe, in our nation's history when we can truly state that there is the potential to make education everybody's business.

As educators we have never doubted the empowering nature of education. Within our own competence we all have attempted to give the very best to this noble vocation.

All of us — from the classroom teacher to the Ministry official — must confess, that despite our own best efforts, we cannot be satisfied that we are delivering that state of the art world-class globally competitive education to our children.

Which of us could be contented with only 31.4 per cent of our children achieving mastery in the 2003 Grade 1 Readiness Test in 4 cognitive skill areas, or 13.6 per cent of our Grade 3 students achieving mastery on five or less subjects in language arts; of 2003 and 2004 G-SAT results that inform us that the average score attained was below 50 per cent for mathematics and science and just over that benchmark for social studies and language arts?

Members of the ministry's directorate will tell you that my heart pained me at the thought (much less the reality) of having Grade Nine students exiting the system at 15 years old with very little option in terms of a learning institution. Even though we do not yet have universal secondary education, we cannot dismiss their fate as not being our responsibility.

I am committed to finding some constructive activity for them. And I have assigned this specific matter to the Youth Division of the Ministry. It cannot be beyond us to find a solution.

Repositioning

While we may have made strides in attaining our targets for upgrading of the teaching cohort with approximately 83 per cent of the teaching force being graduates of teacher training colleges, we cannot be satisfied with the finding that of 22,363 teachers serving in the public system only 20 per cent are trained University Graduates.

It is not just a matter of numbers, of just increasing percentages marginally. We must make the quantum leap now and to do so requires fundamental accelerated transformation. This is what is implied in your very own theme for this year's Conference because repositioning means just that — removing from where you are now; relocating yourself, but doing so relative to others. You reposition because you recognize that where you are is an untenable place, given where you need to go and given a changing landscape. There is no gainsaying that we cannot develop any education system that fails to take into account the imperatives of positioning our nation and our people in the global landscape.

We now have no choice but to be able to compete in an environment in which the knowledge based economies rival the producers of tradable goods. This will have far-reaching and immediate implications for how individual nation states such as ours think about schooling, the transmission of knowledge and the role of citizenship in modern society.

Prime Minister of Jamaica effectively defined this environment when he stated: “Jamaica is part of the global village of this century of open borders, easy travel, mass migration and easy access to information & technology. We are no longer educating our people to live in Jamaica. We are preparing them for a borderless world. Times have changed and we too must change. We must critically examine the product and together as a nation, make the necessary changes that are called for.”

To reposition requires a definition of the product you want to provide. In this case, it must be an educated Jamaican.

The Educated Jamaican

Earlier this year, given the active public interest in education and the articulation of the results desired from the education system, this Ministry under my leadership conducted a series of public consultations. Our motive was to capture the inherent wisdom of our people and the critical gains that can be made from incorporating their creative energies.

Coming out of these consultations was a very incisive description of the product we should aim for: the Educated Jamaican.

According to this wider stakeholder education community who participated in these consultations, the educated Jamaican will:

- Love to learn and will therefore be a lifelong learner continuously developing wisdom and knowledge
- Be well-rounded, agile in mind and able to adjust to different situations, responsible, and able to make decisions’
- Speak an additional language and have at least the minimum requirements for tertiary education
- Be a productive citizen worker in charge of his or her personal economic advancement
- Contribute to a normal development by being:
 - a. Socially-aware
 - b. Conscious of what is good for society
 - c. Committed to a sustainable lifestyle
 - d. Spiritually conscious and mature
 - e. Tolerant of diversity
 - f. Rooted in his, her Jamaican “smaddiness”.

If we were able to produce such a Jamaican then not only would our society be better, but it would be superior to many in today’s or tomorrow’s world of nations.

I do not believe that creating this product is beyond us. I believe that our system is already moulding such individuals — the issue is the scale. Such an individual must be the rule rather than the exception.

I want to emphasize that such a product cannot result only from what happens in the classroom. It will require the consolidated efforts of all the agents of socialisation — the home, the church, the school, the media and the community. They all have to be of one accord, singing the same song from the same hymn sheet, being in harmony rather than singing wildly discordant notes.

As the custodians of the education system, we must ensure that we are not found wanting and that we play our role and play it well.

In this process we have to focus on:

- Enhancing the levels of educational achievement, improving performance at all levels of the system
- Creating citizens committed to lifelong learning by expanding our post-secondary and tertiary opportunities
- Creating citizens equipped with education and competencies to complete globally by increasing exponentially the number of our working-age citizens with internationally recognised certification
- Ensuring that all learners recognize their full potential given their unique abilities.

These objectives can only be achieved if we have learners who are challenged; students who are in an enriching environment; through an education system that is dynamic, relevant responsive and cognizant of the social and cultural needs of our people; our society and the larger community. This is what the new curricula are aimed at achieving. The ROSE curriculum has the prospect of being excited, if used as intended. The new primary curriculum introduced system-wide holds the potential for stimulating interactive learning, stoking the creativity of student and teacher alike. The Early Childhood curriculum, which is in an advanced state of preparation and due for impending implementation will build a solid foundation for social and academic learning by our children.

To give validity to this exciting and enriching environment, we have to have systems of student assessment that will ensure that each learner maximizes his or her potential throughout life. Here Marcus Garvey's words to us are relevant:

“Education is the medium by which a people are prepared for the creation of their own particular civilisation and the advancement and glory of their own race.”

The committed competent qualified effective professional educator holds a place of prominence in this repositioning. We all know that the teacher learner contact and the quality of that contact is a major determining factor in student achievement. The best professionals make learning for

our children fun. They are sensitive to the students' needs. They constantly update their techniques and methods. It is in recognition of the need to build more of such professionals and to support those who are there that we have introduced such programmes as the training of primary school principals, the mentoring programme for new entrants into the profession, the various in-service degree programmes, opportunities for self-development through projects such as PESP and ROSE, the HEART/NTA modular training to upgrade our caregivers in the early childhood system.

We are actively supporting the initiatives by the teachers colleges to become degree-granting institutions. To do so will require increased infrastructural investment in these colleges, including an enhanced technology infrastructure. I congratulate the team at the Joint Board of Teacher education, JBTE led by Professor Errol Miller who has given expression to the vision of a system-wide technology network. This will be an important delivery tool facilitating the sharing of resources. I take it as my personal mandate and mission to work with the teacher training colleges to ensure they become state of the art institutions.

We have to encourage full stakeholder participation in the education system. Parents, communities, guardians, corporate bodies, past students all have a stake in a state of the art, globally competitive system producing citizen workers who are competent, productive and disciplined. Each stakeholder must define a niche through which to contribute to the enhancement of the system. We need to encourage them to do so by removing any inkling of territorialism.

What I am about to say may offend some of us, but I have met too many parents who genuinely want to participate, but feel unworthy by the attitude teachers and principals and guidance counselors display toward them. The school is a part of the community. Community members need to feel a sense of ownership.

We must create a system that is equitable. Quality cannot be the preserve of institutions in particular communities or for selected socio-economic groups. All children must have access to equal standards of teaching, of infrastructure of delivery systems regardless of who they are or where they are. All must have access to and maximum use of learning technologies.

We must create an education system that is accountable and transparent with all stakeholders realising that they are not there for themselves, but for those who are there to learn. The system — from the Ministry to the classroom — must be learner-centred, making decisions based on what is best for the student and the system and not for the convenience of any individual or group.

Everyone in the system from Board member to the ancillary worker must be answerable to one another within a framework of incentives and sanctions.

I recognise that if all of this is to be achieved, we need institutional structure and functioning that allows for performance. Serving this system must be a more flexible results oriented ministry, which is agile and which allows for effective governance at the school level. Central to all of this must be an excellent, well-resourced education system.

Whenever we speak of resources we narrow our vision to discerning how much more we can get from the Budget. That argument cannot be disregarded, but with respect, I ask that as members of a group that has always led this country in intelligent informed debate that you take some time to really look at our Budget and to analytically determine from what margins would we garner such an increase.

In my recent meetings with the principals, I spent some time going through the allocations in the Budget because as partners, we should be aware of the realities confronting each other and then together forge new and realistic options.

Let me start with the issue of salaries to teachers. Last year we completed long and sometimes threateningly acrimonious salary negotiations. The aim of those negotiations was to place members of the teaching profession within 80 per cent of the salaries of their counterparts in the private sector. We agreed on the process to determine this 80 per cent. We agreed on the benchmarks to verify that we attained that 80 per cent. The government kept its share of the bargain and paid based on the agreement. This movement to within 80 per cent will make teachers competitive with others in the workforce with comparable graduate and postgraduate certification and with similar job responsibilities.

WE now have a negotiated settlement. We have an orderly mechanism for future negotiations.

I do not believe that we can continuously and continually use every forum at our disposal to attempt to allude to this issue. I personally take no offence because it is a part of the job. But I believe it is counterproductive and leads to an underlying mistrust and tension, a diversions from areas of collective collaboration and actions and has the potential for creating adversarial relationships where none need exist.

The JTA has signed the memorandum of understanding. Mr. President, I believe members are aware of what that means. Let us use our energies constructively to ensure that when the life of the memorandum of understanding come to an end, the education system would have played its role in ensuring that the country is in a better position to compensate all our workers, including teachers, consistent with their social value, their competencies and levels of production.

Having said that, I do not believe that we can have an excellent self sustaining education system unless more resources are invested in the teaching, delivery and learning systems. We have to find ways to improve the physical facilities in many of our schools. We have to ensure our classrooms are properly equipped with appropriate and adequate furniture for our students and teachers. I believe we may have to rethink the design of some of our physical plants. Schools need auditoriums in which the school community can assemble as a matter of course. This is how a school community is built; how shared values are developed; how students receive a sense of belonging. Children need to have home rooms with form mistresses and masters who can be role models, who can direct and guide them, establish standards of behaviour and convey a sense of caring.

We need additional spaces not only to ensure access for all but to do away with the shift system or manage it in a more orderly manner, where it needs to continue.

We speak about technology. Talk and chalk cut no dash with our children any more. They need to be challenged through multimedia presentations. Even the traditional lay out of the classroom is now an anachronism. We have to modernize the physical environment of the classrooms we need investments there!

Effort to achieve some of these objectives are occurring through the PESP, ROSE 11, New Horizons Project, the Enhancement of Basic Schools projects. But there scope, pace and capacities will not take us where we need to go. Neither will we arrive at the destination at the time we need to.

We must have modern reading and science laboratories if our children are to be given any chance to compete in a global environment.

It is in recognition of the imperative of adequately resourcing the education system that the Prime Minister in charging the National Task Force for Educational Reform mandated them as one of their explicit responsibilities to ‘make recommendations of the financing of the system at all levels from basic to tertiary on the best allocation and optimum use of financial resources in order to achieve the necessary access and quality within the ambit of national resources and consideration of social equity.’

This mandate has two components — the identification of additional resources but the need to ensure the optimal use of the available resources.

If you listened keenly to the public debate you would have heard the recurring theme of value for money. The accountability for expenditure is a responsibility of all players in the sector — the Minister and other members of the political directorate; the permanent secretary and her directors; officers at the headquarters; officers in the field, at the school level — everybody has to ensure that every dollar of expenditure is accounted for... And more.

We must ask ourselves: Does the expenditure of this dollar lead to a better education system?

I know some of the reservations about performance appraisal. It is not a discarded legacy of the industrial age; it is a requirement and demand of the post-cold war, global environment. I believe it is in the interest of every professional to know how well or how badly we are doing, based on our own objectives and on the targets set for the institution. The pilot phase of the performance appraisal process is now completed and it will be introduced into the system come September. It is not an attempt to heap blame on the teachers. It is another step in establishing your undisputed professionalism and of demonstrating to the world — see we are doing the very best we can given the resources we have available.

I put it to you that such a statement will quiet the ‘nay sayers’ and remove from any shadow of a doubt, the need to additionally resource the system. The Prime Minister and every member of the Cabinet are aware of the need for additional but well targeted resources. That is why he has given this as a specific remit for the Task Force to make recommendations in this regard. To release additional resources will require reorganization of some of our expenditure. However, it must also mean innovation in finding funding sources through working with the Ministry of

Finance and other private and public funding agencies. That's a part of repositioning. If we fail to provide such resources, then the work of the task force would have been in vain.

This together with the redirecting of existing resources; reprioritizing some of our initiatives and activities; reorganising some of our institutional arrangements, rethinking the governance and management of the system from the top to the bottom including the central Ministry. The education system and its support institutions, reexamining the curriculum the teaching and support services, the process of assessment and grading, the management of the special needs students, the state of our physical all these are essential to a high achieving education system.

But there is more. The parents have to re-take their nurturing and caring responsibilities. The Community has to make education a real priority and protect the schools and the students. The musicians and entertainers have to work in concert with us in conveying the messages that uplift our children.

Every teacher here, every member of the teaching fraternity is I know, committed to full literacy and numeracy for every child.

Every teacher here, every member of the teaching fraternity is committed to creating disciplined and culturally aware, ethical students who in time become ethical Jamaican citizens.

Every teacher here — every member of the teaching fraternity is determined to create a quality Jamaican workforce, starting with the delivery of quality relevant education to all of our children.

We cannot do this, however, if we retreat into our corner and determine that everything must go on now in the future as it has been in the past. You cannot reposition by keeping your old position and defying anyone to even examine new postures and relationships. It is a contradiction in terms and in reality.

Repositioning means examining new options — even some that are not yet a part of our wildest imagings. Repositioning means openness and grasping the best mix of solutions to achieve the new product.

I am confident that the JTA understands the imperatives of the future.

I am confident that you have always had the leadership to take you to new horizons.

Let us invest our energies in repositioning for the future.

Let us join hearts and hands for the sake of our children and our nation.

Let us continue the practice of engaging in constructive productive dialogue to find solutions rather than assume adversarial postures.

Now is the place. Now is the time. Let us Rise and Re-build!