

# *University of Guyana*

## **Education Reform Roundtable Discussion**

### **‘2018 Green Economy Workshop’**

**Presented on August 6, 2018**

## **THE FUTURE OF EDUCATION IN GUYANA**

Over the past 51 years our Education System has gone full circle and the time has come for us to think outside of the box to remedy the situation. There is no point doing the same thing year after year and expect different results.

At the time of our Independence in 1966 our secondary program was delivered for free by the main public schools, Queen’s College, Bishops’ High School and Berbice High School. Their intake of students was identified as the scholarship awardees determined by the scholarship exam. The three recognized church schools, St. Stanislaus College, St. Rose’s High School and St. Joseph’s High School accepted some scholarship students but in addition their intake was restricted to students whose parents could afford to pay fees. There were also a number of other private schools, among which was Central High School, Tutorial High School, Indian Education Trust etc, where fees were also being charged. This of course restricted access to children who could not afford it.

In the early seventies, Guyana was the beneficiary of a huge hike in the world market price for its sugar. With that windfall, the Government at the time decided to implement several measures that it felt would improve the good fortune of the entire population. It nationalized the Education System, introducing free education from Nursery to University, inclusive of free books and uniforms. This initiative was meant to provide equal opportunity for all of our children, with the high school placement being determined by their results achieved in the grade six examinations.

The primary school buildings were mostly taken over by the Government and the secondary schools were given lease agreements, with the Government being responsible for their maintenance.

Unfortunately just as the sugar price had increased it was not long before the price was significantly reduced on the world market. This coincided with a corresponding increase in the price of oil, which made the generous gift of free education very difficult for the country to afford.

Our politicians were reluctant to accept the fact that free education was becoming unaffordable and tried their best to manage the cost of the system without the windfall sugar revenue. This affected the value of compensation being offered to the staff in the public service, making the teaching profession less and less attractive to bright youngsters leaving school. This has had an adverse effect on the academic quality of the student intake at the CPC which of course has a direct relationship to the competence of the output of teachers from the College.

The profession was further affected by the mandatory retirement age of 55 years in the Public Service, which I believe was a condition inherited from our colonial past.

We have been forced to allow schools to charge for contingencies. The University was forced to re-introduce the payment of fees, which would need to be regularly addressed if we are to afford competent staffing of the institution.

The Government has since allowed the reintroduction of Private schools. Among other things, this means that those who could afford private school fees can gain a better foundation at the primary level. Recently the trend seems to indicate that students who attend private schools are performing better at the national grade 6 Assessment than their counterparts in the public schools. To the extent that this is so, then those students who attend schools where fees are required, are the ones that gain entry into the top secondary schools. This further undermines the goal of equal opportunity to all and equity in education.

This sequence of events has nullified the aim of the Government to provide equal opportunity for students of all economic backgrounds. In this way our system has turned full circle to once again allowing the children of affluent families to have an unfair advantage in accessing a better quality of education. It allows the senior public secondary schools to be occupied mainly by children from these families, while the remaining children would receive the equally beneficial opportunity of going to the established private schools which their parents could afford.

This situation remains inadequate and needs to be addressed. Perhaps some measure should be established to determine those genuinely in need and who would be the students to receive free education.

There is no short term fix of our system. It has taken us 50 years to get where we are today and it will take us decades to correct what presently exists. We need an extensive long term plan, as the Education of our people is the most important task that we have in ensuring the competency of our citizens to satisfy our future needs. The oil industry could greatly enhance our economic welfare but we will require competent, educated and well trained human resources to properly utilize the capital which is likely to be available.

We need to start by attracting better qualified candidates into teaching. This can only be done by making the teaching profession attractive enough to encourage the bright young minds on leaving school to consider a career in teaching as an attractive option.

In order to make this profession more attractive, we can consider the following and other options:

1. Have the remuneration of all trained, qualified teachers be free of income tax. This could apply to all teachers from nursery to university but maybe to qualify, the individual must have attained an agreed certification. In this way one does not qualify simply because he or she is a teacher.
2. A duty free transportation entitlement can be provided at the end of a determined period of satisfactory service.
3. Again after a satisfactory period of such service the teacher can be entitled to a house lot with concessionary low interest financing to construct a modest two bedroom house, which can be limited to possibly G\$ 5 million.
4. On the negative side, we can no longer afford to lose our good experienced teachers who are currently mandated to retire at age 55 since we are unable to replace them with persons of similar competence and experience. This also applies to senior officers in our Ministry. I understand in Trinidad there are efforts being made to increase the retirement age of teachers from 60 to 65 years.

This is not likely to be an easy sell as there are those who will draw parallels with our nurses, police and other public servants indicating that they need special treatment as well. These are valid arguments but they cannot all be solved at once.

While all public servants probably need a better package, until we can afford that with the advent of oil, we cannot compromise the education of our young people who are responsible for our future. Our reasoning is that whoever you are in our society, you are likely to have children, nieces, nephews or grandkids in the school system and what they become will be determined by the quality of their teachers.

Regrettably the outstanding results being achieved by the students at our top schools are dependent on what is termed the 'lessons syndrome', which is geared towards the

success of the students in our society whose parents can afford the cost of extra lessons at the common entrance, CXC and CAPE exam levels.

At present parents of students entering the first form immediately enquire about the availability of extra lessons in almost every subject. On enquiry it was explained that it was first brought about by teachers advising that lessons were necessary as the entire syllabus could not be covered within the timetable. This has since become a culture which is to a great extent prevalent among the private school students as well, even though it is not permitted on the public school premises.

### **SUGGESTIONS TO DEAL WITH THIS SITUATION**

1. The syllabus for the common entrance exam should be determined in a manner in which all schools with competent teachers should be able to easily cover, removing the need for the average student to require extra lessons.
2. It is also recommended that the CSEC curriculum be cut allowing for a maximum of 10 subjects per student which would allow adequate space in the timetable to comfortably cover the syllabus so that there would be less need for extra lessons, making it no longer a necessity.

#### **Suggested 10 subjects:**

English A and B, Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Geography, History, I T and Spanish or Portuguese

### **CHANGE IN MANAGEMENT OF THE MINISTRY**

In addition it is my opinion that the management of the education sector needs revision. In the last 12 years we have had 5 Ministers. They were all transient as their time was limited and they didn't consider their tenure as a long term assignment. They seem more interested in creating a public relations program to make the results being achieved look good as they could during their period at the helm.

Our emphasis should be for a total audit review of the management system of the ministry in which the Minister should just be the executive Chairman. The day to day administration needs to be handled by a highly qualified and well trained Professional as the Chief Executive Officer, supported by at least two equally well qualified deputies. These should be bright, very competent individuals who are not given this position because of their years of service, but for their qualifications and potential ability.

In reviewing the present system there needs to be performance appraisals done of the present staff and we would definitely need to deal with the unreal retirement age.

Having dealt with the restructuring of the management within the Ministry and having made the profession more attractive, we need to ensure that once our teachers are properly trained, they are made to continue a path of professional development. This will enhance their competence and prepare them for the possible opportunities in roles as Guidance Counselors, HODs, Seniors or appointments as Heads or Deputies.

This is a huge undertaking and far easier to talk about than it would be to implement. However, this should not deter us from accepting the challenge of putting the thoughts of our panelist together to come up with a plan to ensure the best quality of education is offered to our young people.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my views and for their consideration.

**Views expressed by:**



**Chris Fernandes**

**Chairman**

**St. Stanislaus College Board of Governors**