

## Hon. Patrick Faber's Address Opening Education Week 2010

### **SALUTATIONS:**

**Children and Young People,  
Parents and Guardians,  
Teachers, Principals and Managements,  
Religious Organizations, Community Organizations, and other Social Sector  
Organizations,  
NGO's and Private Sector Actors,  
Politicians of whatever color or creed,  
Fellow Citizens and Residents of Belize**

This week we celebrate Education Week. It is therefore an opportune time for us to reflect on how far we have come and how far we have yet to go.

On several occasions in the past, I have made the point that many of the issues and challenges that faced us in the education sector twenty years ago remain with us today. As illustration, let me quote from a speech delivered by the former Minister of Education, Hon. Said Musa, in 1990 more than twenty years ago ...

### **and I quote:**

*'Over the past recent decades education in Belize has expanded significantly. There are over 57,000 students in our primary, secondary and tertiary institutions of learning. There are more than 2,200 teachers in over 260 schools. The Church State Partnership is being strengthened and Government is spending almost \$40 million this year on national education. Yet, our children are scoring far below expected averages. Thousands of the children who enroll in our schools drop out before graduating. Rising costs, inadequate management and wasteful bureaucracy cause grave concern. Chronic shortages of qualified teachers, deteriorating and overcrowded school buildings and shortages of learning materials are pervasive problems.'*

**End quote.**

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Fellow citizens, today I could give the same speech but just change the numbers! Today we have almost 100 thousand children enrolled in schools at all levels—almost twice what we had in 1990, we have almost 5,000 teachers—more than twice what we had in 1990, we have 541 schools—more than twice what we had in 1990 and yes we are spending far more on education a 189million—almost five times what we were spending in 1990.

Yet the increased spending has not been proportionately matched by increased outputs and outcomes. Many of those enrolled in our schools will repeat or dropout before graduating. Many of our children are still not achieving satisfactory levels of performance. There remains chronic shortages of trained and qualified teachers at all levels of the system. Rising costs and inadequate planning and management remain significant challenges.

At a recent education conference I and other senior ministry officials attended in Alberta, Canada, the question was put:

*“Are you charting new territory or are you funding a more expensive status quo?”*

This is indeed the question we must ask ourselves as we look back on the last 20 years of educational development in Belize—*are we charting new territory or are we funding a more expensive status quo?* A quick and dirty assessment seems to point to our funding a more expensive status quo for much of the last 20 years.

Fellow citizens, for years we have tried the same old remedies with the same results. Yet for years, in our more candid moments when we are being most honest with ourselves, we have known that the same old remedies, the same old practices do not and cannot work. Indeed, I firmly believe that for years we have known what needs to be done differently...what hard decisions need to be taken in our education system. But we have been afraid, reluctant and resistant to doing things differently because it may disrupt an otherwise settled and comfortable system and invoke the wrath of sacred cows.

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Fellow citizens, anyone who was tuned into education affairs in Belize over the last couple of years will be aware that we in the Ministry of Education have been challenging the status quo. Undoubtedly our efforts have not been without opposition but we have tried our best to engage our partners in this change process.

In 2008, we launched a \$300 subsidy programme for needy first and second form students and last year all Standard Six graduates in Stann Creek and Toledo were given these subsidies to encourage participation in secondary school in these districts where participation in secondary schooling was lowest. To complement this we established a new high school in rural Toledo at Corazon Creek and provided additional classroom buildings to all the high schools in these two districts in order to accommodate the additional students. Today more than 7,000 students benefit from these subsidies to reduce the financial barrier to accessing secondary schooling.

While we have undertaken efforts to increase access, we also realize that for such access to be maintained and improved, quality must also be addressed. We have undertaken several steps in this regard.

For more than a year, we were engaged in the development of and consultations on the Education and Training Act. Earlier this year, we passed the Education and Training Act including the establishment of the Belize Teaching Services Commission to assure the quality and status of the Belize teaching force and the quality of the delivery of education. This body will both ensure standards for entering and retention in the teaching service but also at the same time safeguard the rights teachers. The aim is towards a greater professionalization of the teaching profession and thus building of public confidence in the teaching service.

In complement to this, to address the chronic shortages of qualified and trained teachers at the primary level, we launched the Certificate in Primary Education through our teacher training institutions targeting some 860 teachers with associate degrees in fields other than education to equip them with teaching skills. Because this programme is delivered during the summers and on Saturdays, not only will it increase the number and percentage of trained teachers

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in a short time span but even though all the teachers are provided with full tuition scholarships the cost to the Ministry of Education is less since it does not require paid study leave and replacement teachers. We hope to implement similar strategies for secondary school teachers in the near future.

The intent of both these initiatives, the Teaching Services Commission and the Certificate in Primary Education is to ensure that we employ and retain qualified and capable teachers in our schools towards improving the delivery of quality education to all.

Additionally, with support from UNICEF, we are currently developing and will shortly begin a pilot of a Quality Schools Framework. This framework seeks to set quality standards against which schools can assess and evaluate themselves and plan and implement improvements in those identified areas of weakness. These standards and accompanying processes of self-evaluation and planning seek to ensure that schools are places where the learning and holistic development of our children are nurtured. The idea is that schools and their stakeholders—including parents and managements—will begin to take ownership for improving the quality of education they deliver rather than waiting on 'one size fits all approaches' from the Ministry of Education. This whole school approach to school improvement will complement our other teacher training efforts including in-service and continuing professional development. Again this is aimed at improving the delivery of quality education in our schools. This effort is also being supplemented by the development of a National School Safety Policy through a Memorandum of Understanding with USAID.

Added to this are our efforts to improve early literacy with the establishment of our Literacy Unit. Again this is aimed at improving quality by investing in literacy as a tool for all other learning.

Furthermore, we are conducting national assessments of the provision of early childhood education and school nutrition in order to identify those disadvantaged communities where expansion of these services should be targeted and to inform policy and practice with respect to these services.

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The Education and Training Act also makes provision for the outlawing of corporal punishment from our schools. Given concerns of the teachers of the BNTU, but mindful that we cannot wait for too long, we have established a Task Force on Alternative Student Discipline with broad stakeholder representation to make recommendations on best policies and practices for alternative student discipline and an action plan for implementation.

But the Ministry of Education has also embarked on a number of other initiatives. We have established an Amalgamation Policy and we have begun dialogue with our partners to advance this agenda not only in an effort to use scarce resources more wisely but to improve the quality of the delivery of education in our schools. Similarly, because it is not uncommon to find 2 year scholarships stretched into 3, 4 or even 5 or greater years, we have embarked on a re-registration of students on scholarships at the University of Belize. We are holding those who benefit from scholarships accountable for the assistance they are receiving. This effort is again to ensure that we are getting value for money.

This coming week I will be appointing a Task Force on the Reform of Secondary Education Financing and Curriculum Reform. This is another area where for many years we have known what needs to be done but have hesitated to take action. For many years we have known that the financing of our secondary schools is inequitable and does not foster efficiency. For years we have known that the amount of public funds spent per student varies greatly from school to school. For years we have known that some students benefit from a very broad and diverse curriculum while others experience a narrow and limited curriculum. We have talked about it and talked about it but we have not acted. Yet this is an issue of justice. But even if we wish to discount the issue of justice, if all the violence, crime and social decay does not appeal to our enlightened self-interest and convince us that it is time to act, I do not know what else will.

Fellow citizens, clearly no one can accuse us of attempting to maintain the status quo...indeed we have tried our best to use our scarce resources for the greatest benefit...to ensure that we get more 'bang for our buck!' Indeed we have been willing to take tough positions and decisions. Naturally, our efforts have not been

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and will not be without opposition but we have sought and will continue to engage our partners in the on-going change process.

If you have listened to me over the past two years even when things I said got me into trouble, you will know that I am passionate about making a difference in our education system for the benefit of our people. I am aware that there is a direct relationship between change and uncertainty...that the more profound the change the higher the level of uncertainty. But let us not fear change, in the words of famed computer scientist, Alan Kays, "The best way to predict the future is to create it." Join with us in the Ministry of Education...Let us create the future together. Change we can and change we must! Thank you.