

## **Modernizing our Education System**

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Several reform initiatives are at present holding the attention of our Ministry of Education. These include the Secondary Education Modernisation Programme (SEMP), improvement of reading in primary schools, management of teacher performance, a greater emphasis on teacher development, managing discipline in secondary schools, and continuous assessment in primary schools. My concern (particularly against the background of 2020 Vision) is that we do not see our drive towards modernisation only in terms of technology and economics. It is my hope that our vision for the education sector includes both the will and the financial resources to transform our human resources in terms of morality, culture, and ideas.

In our drive towards educational reform and modernisation of the education system, it is important for us to understand that, worldwide, a new civilisation is emerging. This new civilisation is bringing with it new family styles; changed ways of working, loving, and living; a new economy; new political conflicts; and, above all, a new consciousness among citizens of the world. There is no doubt that educators today must accept the need to continuously improve the structures and processes of education. We can no longer embark on ad hoc interventions to improve education.

Consensus among progressive educational planners advocates that human development within the framework of modernisation is possible only if:

- planning for education begins with a vision of a new society that offers all in it the choices to lead valuable and valued lives;
- there is a commitment to the process of social transformation made possible through system literacy and the expansion of human capabilities through individual action as well as public activism;
- we recognise and accept the empowering role of education.

An examination of the modernisation efforts of developed and developing countries throughout the world reveals the following trends:

- Redesigning the education system to effect learning outcomes, skills, and attitudes that will speak to the needs of the new economy
- Ensuring that vulnerable student groups stay in school to complete their education
- Addressing the needs of students with disabilities
- Developing new approaches to student assessment and data collection
- Supporting and improving teacher development programmes
- Enhancing instructional leadership and curriculum management
- Improving the quality and efficiency of preschool and primary school education
- Producing more efficient computer users at an earlier age
- Promoting computer awareness among teachers to ensure that they can effectively integrate computer usage in delivering the curriculum
- Promoting information technology application in school administration
- Cultivating interest in lifelong learning.

The World Bank suggests that (a) it takes sustained macro-economic growth to finance the necessary education reforms and build the infrastructure to foster a knowledge society; and (b) rapid and sustained economic growth will not be realised where education systems are ineffective and capacities remain limited.

The questions we in Trinidad and Tobago face have become even more critical in the context of the statements of the World Bank. Do we need to embark on the modernisation of our education system? How can we achieve it? What are our strengths? What are our weaknesses? What are the consequences if we fail to modernise?

In our modernisation drive, it is also important to recognise that we might face several barriers and negative attitudes. In this respect, the report of researchers Chubb and Moe on the state of education in the United States is of interest to us. They conclude that the malaise now creeping into education will be difficult to stop, since, so far, the public school system has proven to be “unreformable.” According to them, the very means of public control—legislation, governance by elected boards, and the employment of teachers—were “fundamentally incompatible” with effective education. Another researcher by the name of Binder went further. He states that relaxing a few regulations and mandates cannot lead to fundamental change because various elements of policy—funding, staff credentialing, staff development and allocation—are highly interdependent and none can change significantly if others are held constant. Binder concludes that reform will require far more sweeping changes in school governance than the Ministry of Education, school boards, teacher unions, or supervisors have been willing to contemplate.

In spite of what researchers say with respect to the constraints of reform and modernisation, there is absolutely no doubt in my mind that we have to undergo radical changes if we wish to modernise our education system. I firmly believe that we have the capacity to modernise. I also believe that if we fail to modernise, we will become a nation of imitators—aping the values and lifestyles of other nations. I am convinced that modernisation for us demands that we become conscious of how we (a) see our tasks as educators; (b) are prepared to work together for the good of the nation; (c) develop programmes for educating the old, young, and challenged in our schools; (d) select and apply effective pedagogical and training methods for developing our people; (e) allocate the required resources (human, material, and financial) for effecting optimal development; (f) provide the necessary structures and policies for facilitating desirable human development; and (g) network with others to provide meaningful schooling for our youth.

Finally, we have to recognise that government alone cannot successfully embark on reform. As citizens, teachers, TTUTA members, and auxiliary workers in the education system, we must all play our part. To TTUTA in particular, I say, yours is the responsibility of ensuring that all stakeholders stay the course. It is indeed a tremendous responsibility. Not only must you seek the interest of the entire nation, but also that of all

the individual members of the society—especially our students who represent our most valued human resource.

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