

## **Education for a Vibrant Society**

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Human beings are primarily developed by five cultural institutions—the home, the school, the church, the media, and the arts. These institutions ultimately help to define the quality of life in societies. When they fail, societies, among other things, tend to become depraved, violent, unimaginative, or unproductive.

History has revealed that as the world marches forward, societies have become increasingly complex, secular, and more reliant on schools. This has been so even as the media and the arts become more dynamic. The home, at the same time—particularly among certain sections of society—seems to be losing its effectiveness. Social commentators, as a result, have been forced to conclude that the only representative institution that can now save society is the school; that if the school fails, all will be lost.

Against this background and reality, an examination of the delivery of education in Trinidad and Tobago reveals that the education sector in our society is in need of urgent renewal. I have absolutely no doubt that the time for action is long past.

Traditionally, we have concentrated on success in primary, secondary education, technical-vocational education, and now tertiary education. Such matters as attitudes, morals, and character were left to be shaped by the home and the church. In fact, our conscience was developed by our moral and religious training. All this has now been taken over by the media and the arts, which seem to set our values, norms, and mores for us.

Also, our teachers and other relevant education personnel appeared to be well in control of the education sector. Duties, responsibilities, and tasks were clearly defined. Policies were absolutely unambiguous. Controversies were entirely out of the picture. Indeed, individuals were appointed on the basis of their experience and reputation.

However, we are now in the information age. The environment and setting are no longer placid, but increasingly turbulent. As a result, the old ways are no longer effective. Without doubt, we have to find new strategies for maintaining a buoyant education sector. In doing this, however, we have to remember that our education system is supported by eight main pillars: 1) the political directorate of the society, 2) the Ministry of Education, 3) the Teaching Service Commission, 4) Denominational boards, 5) Teachers, 6) Parent Teacher Associations, 7) Training institutions, and 8) teacher professional associations, for example, the Trinidad and Tobago Unified Teachers Association (TTUTA).

If we accept the old adage that a chain is as strong as its weakest link, then we will also have to embrace the view that our education system, because of serious organizational defects in each of these eight pillars, is not as effective as it should be. A brief assessment would reveal that each of these pillars is affected by a culture that has its basis in the negative elements of our colonial legacy, and a failure to see professionalism as the lifeblood of effective organizations.

All the relevant data confirm that unless we restructure our education sector and these pillars in keeping with the need for a more vibrant and caring society, our nation will continue to flounder. There is absolutely no doubt in my mind that we have to pay particular attention to the structure and functions of our Ministry of Education, the Teaching Service Commission, and our training

institutions. These institutions need a vision of urgency and purposefulness, a mission of national development, and a passion for professionalism.

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