Failing Schools
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Developments in Trinidad and Tobago society over the past decade have led many commentators on education to conclude that all is not well with our approach to schooling. Research findings coming out of England and the United States suggest that the phenomenon of failing or ineffective schools is also being experienced in their educational systems. The research literature identifies a number of reasons why schools tend to be failing or ineffective.

Traditionally, failing schools have been viewed as schools in which students perform poorly at standardised national tests—particularly in English (or the official native language) and mathematics. In more recent times, researchers have acknowledged that effective schools should not only be those schools that excel at academic examinations. The argument is that human beings are made up of mind (the cognitive domain), body (the psychomotor domain), and soul (the affective domain). Therefore, for schools to be effective they must produce students of acceptable standards in the cognitive, psychomotor, and affective domains. This means that our future citizens must not only do well in academic examinations, but must also demonstrate competence and excellence in sport and the fine arts, and, above all, concern for their fellow citizens, the nation, spirituality, and ethical standards.

In an attempt to achieve these objectives, the government has directed considerable financial resources to our education sector. What is in question is the extent to which value has been added to our education system. Another issue may be whether the money spent was mobilised in an effective and efficient manner. For example, we may want to know why in spite of all the funds set aside for education in consecutive national budgets, our schools continue to underperform in the eyes of so many of our citizens.

According to the research, several factors are responsible for this state of affairs. They include. 1) understanding the nature and dynamics of low socio-economic areas; 2) improving the conditions of dilapidated schools; 3) generating more positive relationships among stakeholders; 4) improving the quality of teaching and learning in the affected schools; 5) building stronger community relationships between the school and the outside community; 6) focusing on meaningful and continuous professional development; 7) building de facto, and not only de jure, leadership teams in the school, which can motivate, raise morale, and sustain performance over time; 8) giving teachers leadership responsibility and encouraging them to work together in teams; 9) creating, promoting, and sustaining an information-rich environment; and 10) ensuring external support—particularly from the curriculum, pastoral, and technical officers attached to the Ministry of Education.

If we accept the findings of research as highlighted above, we may then begin to question whether, since 1959, we have been approaching the development of our education sector in keeping with needs analysis and in response to the imperatives of the times.

Apart from focusing only on building new schools, what about culture creation? Are our teachers as trained and developed as they should be in an information-dominated society? Do we have the right principals and central office officials for the job? Are they being kept abreast of innovative methods to ensure effectiveness, through continuous professional development?

To my mind, unless we attempt to respond to the 10 research findings highlighted above, no amount of money spent will be able to set right the problems of our failing schools.

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