

The 21st Century School

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Teachers, through the Trinidad and Tobago Unified Teachers' Association (TTUTA), have won their long-standing battle for salaries that are competitive with salaries paid to similarly qualified people in different sectors. Interestingly, with this major victory, observers, including stakeholders, are calling upon teachers to match their 21st century remuneration with their output.

Such a match in output is inevitably linked to modern initiatives in educational planning and policy globally. Quite apart from emphasising targets such as “education for all” and “excellence in education,” policy makers and, equally importantly, those holding the purse strings, are stressing that “to whom much is given, much is expected.” More than ever, the teacher in the 21st century classroom is expected to deliver within the parameters of formally stipulated expectations. Within the profession, these expectations are expressed, in the first instance, through vision and mission statements, which translate into specific goals and standards.

School-based management is one major strategy through which the modern school is expected to better manage the achievement of professional standards. Within the last decade, research and extensive professional experience initially pointed the way to applications of this approach in countries such as Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand. Its ultimate concern is the improvement of student learning outcomes through the decentralisation of decision making, resources, and responsibilities. This approach to school management maximises the role of sensitivity to the local context of the individual school, while maintaining a delicate balance with the centrally determined national framework, which provides the required support.

When schools take more charge of themselves, the accountability level increases. No matter what the overarching policies may be, or what trends may influence them, stakeholders are always carefully scrutinizing student performance, and will hold administrators and teachers responsible. The school of this century also has to pay attention to those outcomes that reflect social capacity building—the facilitating and sustaining of relationships among school, home, community, business, industry, and other agencies. In short, modern society is in need of citizens who can make meaningful contributions to civil society. Are schools preparing students to be such citizens? Are such learning outcomes measured?

How school leaders operate within a self-management system will depend on their own capacity to utilise data from their local contexts to inform their decision making. Successful school-based management assumes that school leaders have the knowledge base to provide the stimulus and support for developing strategies and mechanisms on the ground to impact student learning. This would include professional staff development in curriculum, pedagogy, and action research skills, in addition to building the support of the school's community. Rather than depend on external influences, schools have to develop the skills to look inside to find answers and solutions.

The 21st century teacher in Trinidad and Tobago can no longer function in the static mode for years on end. In order to function within a system that is persevering in the quest for professionalism, teachers have to avail themselves of continuous professional development, without waiting to have it thrust upon them. It is assumed that professional accreditation and re-accreditation are a reasonable part of the professional package that teachers fought hard and long for. Quality assurance is going to demand that practitioners have tools other than knowledge of their subject matter. In this century, the term *professional* has a specific meaning, as does *senior teacher*. In each instance, the individual must have the capacity to lead, to manage resources, including human resources, and to take advantage of information and communications technology to develop new understanding and networks.

Leaders of schools today, while they have to be relentless in their efforts to build capacity within their schools, have to be constantly alert to enabling teaching staff to translate broad goals into specific tasks. This is the era of performance management. Modern teachers must acknowledge the responsibility to manage themselves. Setting goals for students only will never suffice; the professional teacher of this era must also set professional goals. These can only be derived after reflection and analysis of practice—the key ingredients of improvement and success.

This redirects us to the matter of accountability. The post-modern world, too, is obsessed with that which is “research-based,” “evidence-based,” and “data-based.” Lesson planning, tracking student performance, proof of professional effort, and proof of professional involvement translate into time-consuming record keeping. The post-modern school, therefore, has to develop a culture that promotes and sustains accountability for organisational decisions and outcomes.

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