

Address to the Grenada National Parent Teacher Association
Seminar on Adopting the New Constitution

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Today I congratulate this new body, Grenada National Parent Teacher Association (NPTA) in this expressed willingness to participate in a constructive way in the development of education in Grenada. This venture today, I am told, deals with the adoption of the new constitution. I am happy to play this small role by sharing some ideas I have on the matter. The substance of my short discourse is intended to stimulate your interest in the prospects that may lie ahead. However, in order that you may be able to play meaningful roles in this organization, first of all you need to read and understand the Education Act 2002. So challenge number 1 is to become familiar with the law that governs the provision and process of education in Grenada.

The responsibilities of parents go far beyond providing physical care and attention and emotional attachment. Ensuring that children receive an adequate and suitable educational experience is probably one of the most important responsibilities. I am referring to education in the broadest sense to include formal schooling as well as education about how to live successfully in our fast-moving and challenging world. The difficulty that parents have is that the present social, cultural and economic environment has changed drastically from the time many parents of today were children. For example, there is a lively competition among various agencies and media in society for the attention of the child. One striking example is the influence of television on our young children and adolescents. There is also the argument put forward that children have fewer contacts with parents because either one parent is absent periodically or permanently, or both parents work for long hours.

This conference represents one major stride in addressing some of these issues and in carving out a role for parents and teachers in enhancing high quality participation in the lives of our children and in the family as a whole. In more

specific terms this conference deals with giving parents a greater voice in the formal education of their children. I think that this process is very exciting and challenging, and provides the opportunity for parents to make a worthwhile contribution to the growth and development of not only their biological children, but to all the children of this beautiful Spice Island nation, Grenada.

There are several reasons why parents should play this active role. Just over three years ago the OECS Education Reform Unit conducted a survey to find out the attitudes that secondary school students had to schooling. Overall the research found that the students who were surveyed liked their school and schooling in general. We found also that there were certain factors that helped to develop a positive attitude to school. Two of them are important to this conference. One factor is that the higher the level of support that teachers give to students and interest shown in students' welfare, the higher the level of effort students put into their work. Also, in this type of situation students tend to show a greater liking for their school and to believe that school will help them to make a good future for themselves.

The second important factor affecting students' attitude toward schooling is the positive involvement of parents in their children's school life. This involvement includes helping with homework, and providing encouragement. Students reported that praise from parents for good school work was important to them.

They also reported that parents had a strong influence on their thoughts about a future career. Of course, this positive outlook would tend to be more prevalent if the home provides an environment where there is a high level of encouragement, love and motivation. In fact the level of security and safety in the home should be extremely high. If we accept the position that parents are important in students' academic life, there is cause for concern when we read and hear of

situations where parents display lack of interest in children's schooling, or when a family is constantly engaged in abusive and traumatic events.

The formation of a National Parent Teacher Association is one positive step in the direction of giving parents more responsibility for governance of the school system. I should commend the people of Grenada for ensuring that allowance was made for an organization such as this in the Education Act of 2002. This association would provide the formal setting for parents to participate in a range of activities that would enhance the quality of education in the country as a whole.

There are a few significant specific ways in which the National Parent Teacher Association may assist schools to deliver their tasks more efficiently and effectively. One way is in obtaining relevant information from schools and acting on that information to make parents aware of their roles. For example, there are minimum competency tests given to students at various stages in their school life. Some parents may not understand the importance of such measures or may not be able to help to prepare their children adequately. The NPTA could arrange for community leaders and groups to help parents who cannot cope by themselves. A national association can also organize community gatherings to foster confidence in schools, especially for those parents who have not had successful experiences in school as children. As more parents become more competent in preparing their children for coping in school, these newly oriented parents may be catalysts in bringing yet more parents into the fold. I should note, however, parent education has to be meaningful to parents, and must motivate them to want to be part of the process. The NPTA should develop incentive schemes to encourage and reward participation. In fact, a national PTA should seek opportunities to collaborate with other community-based

organizations in the thrust to increase parental involvement in the educational process.

There are many ways in which the school can benefit from the activities of this association. Division 9, Article 3 of the new Education Act makes provision for an Education Advisory Council. The NPTA is to be represented on that body, according to the law. Division 10 of the Act states the function of the Advisory Council. This provision puts the NPTA in a privileged position as a participant in major decisions in education such as the formation of regulations, teacher training, curriculum and text books, to name a few areas. The major benefit of this involvement will be the opportunity to bring to the national arena matters and issues that affect parents and children's participation in formal education.

I should warn, however, that although the association may be established formally, the effectiveness of its work depends on the participation of the entire body in appropriate ways. Of course, care has to be taken to ensure that the representation on a national PTA is spread across geographical areas and socio-economic groups in the society. The proposed constitution of the NPTA takes care of this pattern of representation. The article on Membership allows for the views of individual school parent teacher associations throughout the country to be represented. In addition, the organization into School PTA, Zonal PTA and the NPTA provides some degree of manageability of the structure.

I would suggest, however, that making the structure work would be challenging. A structure is only as good as the channels it opens up for communication. Officers and members alike would have to be vigilant to ensure that members at the school level participate fully, so that when recommendations are made at the highest level, the association is not accused of "taking sides". Incidentally, "working the structure" calls for constant contact with the parents in all parts of

the country - urban and rural. Members should not wait only for the Annual Conference of delegates to voice their concerns. The NPTA must be accessible. That is, the public relations officer or department must be constantly active in keeping members aware of all developments of the association. Also, the information provided to parents and the nation as a whole must be accurate. Moreover, the views for the “ground”, so to speak, should be channelled to the appropriate level of the NPTA in a timely manner.

The third issue about representation is addressed in the proposed constitution. In Article 5, Section D, there is provision for officers of the Executive Committee to hold office for no longer than two years, with half of the council members being elected every year. This provision provides the opportunity for a constant revitalizing of the ideas through new members. However, one must also take note that too rapid turnover may be problematic at times. Therefore there is the need for faithful record keeping, especially in cases where the association is working on an issue that is thorny and would take some time to be resolved.

There are a few points I would like to raise concerning the way in which there may be greater success in the activities of this new body. We know that the success of parent teacher associations varies according to the type of school, the perceived success of students at examinations, at times the socio-economic status of the parents and even the willingness of teachers and parents to make the association work. The vibrancy of the NPTA will depend in part on the actual progress made in zonal and individual PTAs.

First, we should remind all of our PTAs that the organization consists of two groups, the parents and the teachers, in a willing partnership. It is sometimes the case where teachers feel that they cannot afford the extra time to remain for a meeting, and would request that meetings be held during school hours. Even

more serious are instances where teachers may develop the view that parents should not meddle in the affairs of the school because they know very little or nothing about teaching. Then there are instances of parents who work in some sectors where because of the shift system they find it inconvenient to attend meetings regularly. Also, I am sure that you have heard of or have experienced situations where parents come into the school in a confrontational manner. These particular phenomena may be addressed through negotiation and compromise.

The important consideration in the functioning of PTAs is obtaining views and feedback from all parents and teachers. I would suggest that at the local school level the principal has a major leadership role to undertake in this venture. Leadership in this sense involves encouragement and persuasion and a willingness to listen to and consider all concerns and problems. If parents are to be part of the decision-making experience they should feel accepted by the school, and teachers should not interpret parental participation as a threat to their profession.

The NPTA through its zonal and school PTAs may recognize the cooperative efforts between parents and school in tangible ways. PTAs may engage in curricular and teaching activities within schools, especially in vocational, craft and cultural activities. The NPTA may even organize competitions among school and zonal PTAs in these areas in order to stimulate high levels of performance of these organizations. A nation devises a number of activities that will assist in the development and enhancement of the cultural ideas and practices in the society. The school, through its formal social studies and cultural/drama programmes, plays a major role in contributing to cultural development, persistence and transmission. Also, it is through the school that many children come to learn and appreciate the country's social and historical

development in a structured way. At the same time, in the wider community celebrates and commemorates a number of festivals and momentous occasions in traditional manner. The NPTA could undertake a project to integrate the communities' cultural experience and activities into the cultural programme of the school. In fact, the NPTA can be a source of bringing various aspects of a nation's culture to the wider public, through organized programmes as well as through competitions and displays.

Another fundamental contribution of the NPTA could be in the area of school discipline. The new Education Act (Division 5, Articles 51 – 56) deals with discipline in schools. This section defines the relationship between the school and the parent in relation to cases involving the proper conduct of students in school. The NPTA, through its zonal and school PTAs should endeavour to play a major role in this area. First, the NPTA could urge its wider membership to become familiar with school rules. It would be useful, too, if there could be some commonality among schools in the procedure for developing rules as well as in the actual rules themselves. Also, this organization could ensure that there is proper representation for both teachers and students in cases involving violating codes of discipline. Conflict resolution and other ameliorative activities should be explored collaboratively so that more students could come to realize that teachers and parents are working together to provide a worthwhile education for them.

Another activity that would be a challenging one for the NPTA could be the task of bringing fathers into the educational experiences of their children. Research in the Eastern Caribbean has found that children who live with both parents in the same home generally do well in school. We also know that in many homes fathers are not present. Consequently, there is some concern in our Caribbean countries about the minimal role played by some fathers in the general welfare of

their children. The challenge is to discover ways in which fathers can be made to contribute to their children's education in a positive manner. Nationwide discussions organized by the NPTA could search for solutions to the problem of fathers not playing an active role in students' lives. In this regard, the issue of neglect and abandonment of school age children should be explored and recommendations may be made to the relevant authorities.

The suggestions that I have made are not exhaustive and I am that the NPTA will devise some programmes that are challenging and purposeful. I wish the NPTA all success in its deliberations to adopt the constitution. I would hope that the decisions taken today would lead to fruitful relationships among parents, between parents and the school, and between this formal body and the Ministry of Education. Grasp the opportunity granted to be part of the policy-making process with both hands, play an active role in deciding on the educational process, and most of all, be good parents.

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