

Reflections on Education

In a very good article written by Larry Saunders where he summarizes the current condition of the educational system in the Bahamas, a number of striking and hard hitting facts come to light.

- "This year alone the government will spend \$265 million on scores of public schools (and the College of the Bahamas) to educate more than 50,000 students. Yet experts say this massive investment is producing a growing underclass of functional illiterates who are virtually unemployable."
 - "The overwhelming and critical national problem is functional illiteracy on a large scale," says Coalition chief Barrie Farrington. "What we are looking at is a societal failure of immense consequences. It is a real nightmare; a horror movie."
 - "...Looking at the two most important subjects, 56% of students from public schools who take the English language exam "fail", and 82% of public school students who take the math exam "fail"."
 - According to the Coalition, "this is unacceptable. Everyone in business, science and engineering agrees that an understanding of basic math is critical to a range of both low-tech and high-tech jobs...from carpentry to computer system maintenance, the management of a small business and even the management of one's personal finances." (especially in these unusual economic times)
- The report by the National Coalition on Education then goes on to suggest a number of broad based initiatives for implementation in order to at best put a band aid on the haemorrhage.
- Restore order and civility in the classroom - The reality of teaching in the public system is that resolving classroom conflict replaces learning and good teachers leave; which diminishes the system. The Education Act, the School Standing Orders, and the Manual for Administrators and Teachers are long on expectations and short on responsibilities and consequences.
 - Decentralise school management - Principals must be able to manage their "education business" by controlling budgets to optimize teacher and student performance. That means providing a proper physical environment,

WELCOME Fr. Shazzabazzar A. Turnquest



Dear Readers,

Lent is almost done. This Lent I had the opportunity to participate in the West-Central Archdeaconry Pulpit Exchange. Pulpit exchanges are always healthy undertakings. It provides an opportunity for us Family Island priests to come over and 'see the lights' of the big city of Nassau, offers young priests in Nassau the opportunity to come and experience family island ministry, and more importantly reinforces for us 'out islanders' the reason why we avoid Nassau as often as possible...traffic! This Lent I was originally scheduled to be at St. James Adelaide, however with AGM's and other engagements this was to be rescheduled but I ended up there in any event, as well as to St. Ambrose and a glorious time was held at both churches. Instead of staying put, (Frs. Kerr, Rolle and I did that last year) we came to Nassau as scheduled. Frs. Sturup, Kabiga and Clarke made the missionary journey to the big yard. Coming to Nassau also affords us family island priests the opportunity to visit the doctor, do some shopping (I bumped into Fr. Kerr at Solomon's on Saturday), make enquiries about upcoming events, attend weddings and funerals (Donald had a funeral on Saturday) and to visit old friends (one of my dear friends Mr. George Kerr, who is 90 years old and in hospital). Pulpit exchanges are a good thing, sometimes the logistics can be difficult to sort out but in the end it's always worth it. I can't wait for the Advent pulpit exchange this year. I wonder how hard it would be to do a Diocesan pulpit exchange?

PHOTOS FROM THE PARISH TEA PARTY 2009

On Sunday, March 29th, 2009 the Parish of St. Margaret's and St. Mary Magdalene held its second annual ACW Tea Party. Here are some of the photos. Others will be posted to the website shortly.



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Reflections on Education

Continued

- Compensate good teachers - Given their responsibilities relative to other public service employees, teachers are underpaid and work in poor conditions. While there are good teachers in the public school system, there is a growing concern that some are poorly trained, mis-utilized or under-motivated. Annual performance reviews rate teachers on a five-point scale, and it is reported that virtually all receive an "Above Average" or "Outstanding" score.
- Eliminate social promotion - Allowing students who have failed to meet performance standards to pass on to the next grade eventually rewards minimum effort with a lavish prom. Social promotion destroys discipline and cripples the learning process. Finding the means to end or greatly modify this practice is a gigantic problem.
- Deal with the disengaged male - Any discussion of the education crisis must consider the consequences of the single female-headed family unit, and the related disengagement of the average father from parenting. Within this environment boys fall behind academically. One solution is the establishment of an all-male primary and secondary school to help shape the culture of the student.
- Restructure education - Reforms cannot be implemented unless the Department of Education itself is reengineered and allowed to operate free of political control. Budgeting, incentive and management systems that are widely used in the private sector must be applied to a decentralized school system. And public schools should be able to adopt the proven elements that are conducive to learning in the private school system.

I would like to expand on four of them: (a) the elimination of social promotion, (b) dealing with the disengaged male, (c) restoring order and civility in the classroom and (d) compensating good teachers.

The Elimination of Social Promotion

I, as do many persons, believe that there is a need to eliminate social promotion. For those who do not know, social promotion is the progression of a student to the next grade level in school because they have attained their next birthday but have actually failed the grade level. The challenge is, 'What do we do with them?' At my son's school there is a little boy in Grade 1 who has failed Grade 1 two times already. He's going on seven years of age, he's turning into a little terror; but, 'What do we do with him?' Do we promote him to Grade 2 even though he cannot cope with Grade 1 or repeat him again until he is 8 or 9 or 10?

Education psychologists will tell you that in cases like this one, this child probably has a learning difficulty. He needs to be tested. Where can he be sent for testing in Andros? Is there somewhere special that he can go for extra training? Education technocrats would assert that the teacher needs to 'differentiate' in order to include him, but this is a

fallacy. Just policing twenty one first graders, some high achievers, some low achievers and the rest in between from nine to three each day, five days a week is harder than climbing Mount Everest. This problem continues from Grade 1 to Grade 12 with children graduating from high school who literally cannot read. I have seen this for myself. It is not an illusion or negative publicity thrown up, it is the truth.

Dealing with the disengaged male

Just this past week in the London Guardian newspaper there was an article on a young black man who had been elected to the post of Student Union President of the Cambridge University Union in England. This was a first for the University in its 800 years of existence with Oxford electing their first black Student Union President only last year. The young man came from a single mother home with five other siblings, lived in a low cost council flat in the rough end of North London and still made it to one of the premier universities of the world to study Geography and made history in becoming the first black Student Union President. How did he achieve this?

The article highlights that for his high school years he went to a special Catholic High School for boys only. While the rest of his neighbourhood probably attended the local Government comprehensive school, there was something special about this young man, not only was he academically bright, but he was involved in all manner of extra-curricular activity. Did his mother have the money for the school fees? Probably not, but then again maybe the church school found a scholarship for him. In Cambridge, just down by the Fitzwilliam Library is a little school tucked away on a back road called the St. Catherine's School for Girls, it too is a school run by the Catholic Church. As Dr. Kirkley Sands illustrates in his latest book, the church has for a long time in the Bahamas been a critical part of educational framework of the country.

Perhaps, one of our churches should experiment with a specialist school for boys and a separate one for girls? Look at Morehouse College and Spellman College in Atlanta for example. That model works, and it works well.

Restoring order and civility in the classroom

This is an issue close to my heart. From my own experience there appears to be a complete disregard for the importance of a quality education among our students. Everyday I see the frustration on the faces of children who actually want to learn, whose parents have drummed into their heads how important education is especially in these times, who are being held back because they have to struggle to learn side by side with children who couldn't care whether the sun shone in the sky or not. The scourge of mixed ability teaching continues to wreck havoc on the educational system. I teach Technical Drawing to a class of seventh graders, about half the class come from the top stream and the other half come from the bottom stream. For the most part there is no problem with the top streamers, they are keen and they try to do their work. For the rest, they don't want to be in Technical Drawing at all. Before choosing this option some of them thought the

class involved drawing pretty pictures all day when in fact the subject is, much to their chagrin, Advanced Geometry. So what happens, they talk non-stop and become disruptive.

What recourse is there for the teacher? After the unfortunate incident a few years ago where a young man died after receiving corporal punishment, teachers were no longer allowed to administer it. Since then, according to veterans in the field, the children have all appeared to go haywire. They know you cannot touch them, they know they can do whatever they want, the administration is burdened down with their own responsibilities and yet the cane is the only thing that they fear. They cannot be kept in detention after school because they will miss their bus, if the teacher attempts a lunch time detention, the teacher is disenfranchised, the law says that troublesome students must be taken back into the school environment and so the whole system marches merrily on the road to hell.

Compensation of Good Teachers

Every year teachers are assessed by administrators a number of times, twice with advanced knowledge and once unannounced. Records are scrutinized and a lesson is taught. At the end of all this, a cumulative grade is given at the end of the year on the Annual Review Form. In England, while on teaching practice, the lecturer told us a funny story of one of his reviews. The Labour Government appointed a body called OFSTED to assess teachers and what actually happened is that OFSTED got so bogged down in administration, statistics and procedures that it too was eventually phased out because it became too costly to maintain. After his review by the agents from OFSTED, he was teaching a class on metalwork, he got his review, didn't even open it, told the lab technician to fire up the steel forge to the highest it could go, and then threw the form in. With this week's reading of Nebuchadnezzar and the fiery furnace on Wednesday still fresh in my mind, I can see the sparks now.

All teachers are good teachers. We are all different. We have our strengths and our weaknesses. We may be good at some things and bad at others. There is no one cumulative assessment tool that can be used to determine how good or how poor we are. One size does not fit all. Teaching is a vocation. All are not called to be teachers. Teachers are overworked, underpaid, work in environments that are only fit for demolition, they are not social workers, they take abuse daily, and they try to educate your children. I salute those parents who make the sacrifice to find \$1000 plus a term for their child's education. I salute those parents who actually care about what their child is doing in school. Come and ask me and I will tell you. They may be angels at home but many of them are devils at school.

Wednesday April 1, 2009

Mem: Frederick Denison Maurice
Social Reformer 1872

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