

ADDRESS TO BE DELIVERED AT THE LESTER
VAUGHAN SCHOOL ON FRIDAY, 28TH JANUARY, 2005

It is indeed an honour to attend this speech day today. This school with its lush St. Thomas setting, its well-kept surroundings, its panoramic view, the carefully selected art pieces which decorate the entrance ways all serve to remind us of the ideal school. I hope that the students who attend here are aware of how lucky they are to be able to attend this institution. The Lester Vaughan School was opened in January 1999 and is therefore one of the most modern schools in Barbados. The Principal and those members of staff who were here from the inception have had to grapple with the serious challenges of creating an effective school with staff and students who were situated in another place. This they have done with great professionalism. The Principal, Mr. Barker, I often describe as a great educator who clearly understands the modern, dynamic role he has to play. He is, therefore, equally comfortable with the role of instructional leader as he is driving down the road to collect students who dare to tarnish the name of Lester Vaughan

School by misbehaving on the way to or from school. On behalf of the Ministry of Education, Youth Affairs and Sports, I congratulate you and your staff on students' performance over the past year and the outstanding leadership you have provided over the last five years.

Recent events have caused education to be the focus of attention on the popular call-in programmes, among groups gathered across the island and individuals from all walks of life who have taken the time to call with suggestions, to express surprise, to ask questions and some to offer prayers. This interest is welcome because at least it means that our citizens are not totally disengaged from educational matters. Barbados spends approximately \$94,000,000 annually on primary education and approximately \$106,000,000 annually on secondary education. There are about 45,000 children and 3000 teachers in 103 government primary and secondary schools. There is a textbook loan scheme for secondary students who pay \$75.00 per year to use these books. Expenditure on salaries, equipment and furniture,

materials, school meals etc. total approximately x000,000. It is, therefore, fitting that all Barbadians should participate in meaningful discussion on education. Unfortunately, there is little sustained, informed discourse on educational issues. Educators are partly to be blamed for this because much of what goes on in schools is shrouded in secrecy as persons seek to protect the reputations of both students and teachers. Some of this is, of course, understandable since the good name of a school can be completely altered by a mere rumour. I think, however, that the time has come for us to acknowledge that some accountability to the public is necessary since our educational system is either directly funded or supplemented through grants by the taxpayers of Barbados. This requires a measure of openness about the school system. In this small society, fears of many kinds militate against the type of openness that is required to keep the education system fresh, vital and true to its inherent dynamic nature. Fear of change, fear of an apparent loss of traditional authority by teachers and the natural fear of modern students who seem to take pleasure in pushing the

traditional boundaries of acceptable behaviour way past what is bearable in a classroom setting. We fear the growing litigious persons who threaten to consult lawyers on educational decisions. Whereas I will argue that these trends should not daunt us, it would be foolhardy not to admit that Barbadian educators feel vulnerable at this time. Some serious questions are being asked. Who really owns our schools? Who is in charge? Who sets the rules? And when things go wrong, who takes the blame? Recent debates have revealed varying degrees of misunderstandings about the relationships between teachers and students and parents. One lesson we have learnt is that any criticism of one of these stakeholders, however justified, is regarded as bashing. On the other hand, since all of us have attended school at some time in our lives, each of us tells his or her own story about glorious schooldays long gone, forgetting that in the last thirty or so years the very fabric of our individual and societal existence has undergone drastic transformation. Nostalgia is pleasant and reflection on the past is useful but when all is said and done, we must face

head-on the challenges which beset us now. How have we come to this impasse between teachers and parents and teachers and children? Indeed, is it an impasse or is it a clash of cultures so great that we have very little understanding of one another since we no longer share any common philosophy or common goals about education. The culture of the school and the culture of the home and society are at significant variance resulting in a form of toxic frustration being experienced by principals, teachers, students and parents. By toxic, I mean that persons feel helpless and powerless to bring about change in individuals or in the system. What does a teacher do to get more students to do homework when there is no adult supervision at home? How does one motivate a drug addict to do school work? What does one do with a child who hates his parents, lives with an old grandmother and only comes to school for babysitting purposes? What about the parents who try their best but whose children are delinquent?

These challenges have not just surfaced. Such problems and more exist in every school in Barbados and a major part of the frustration is that teachers believe that these issues are not being attended to while more and more is being expected of them. At the same time, there are parents and other adults who believe that a child will learn regardless of his emotional and psychological state. We know, however, that once these needs are not met there is the likelihood of deviant behaviour. With the decline of detentions and other forms of discipline, suspensions became the major form of punishment for persistently bad-behaved students. In 1998 The Edna Nicholls Centre was established to provide an out of school suspension programme for secondary students who breach school regulations by fighting, damaging school property, assaulting or threatening teachers or fellow students. Since its opening, over six hundred students have been referred to the Centre mainly for fighting, including fighting with a female parent on the school compound, violent attacks on other students, threatening teachers and students with death, constant insubordination, truancy, possession of

weapons, disrupting class, skipping classes, gambling, abusive language and inappropriate sexual behaviour on the school compound and in the minibus and possession of drugs. Incidents of stabbing are settled in the courts and some students have been sent to the Government Industrial Schools. The figures for terms 1 to 3 of the last school year indicate that there were 159 referrals, 33 of whom were females. Recent figures also show that out of 50 students who were tested for drug use, 21 tested positive. These students were between the ages of 12 and 15 and parents gave consent for the tests to be done. Students who are referred to the Edna Nicholls Centre assemble at the Ministry of Education where they board the bus which takes them to the Centre accompanied by one or two of the staff members. Students may spend ten days at a time at the Centre receiving counseling for anger management and other anti-social behaviours. Members of the Barbados Defence Force have been helping with disciplinary exercises. The Centre is not a long-term rehabilitation institution but staff visit homes and parents to establish meaningful communication linkages.

Some of these students really need long-term psychological, and in some cases, psychiatric help.

Let us now examine the rationale for a Student Code of Discipline. The Student Code of Discipline was conceptualized to regulate the way in which individual schools dealt with student misbehaviour. It is stated in the rationale that at this stage of our country's development, the Ministry of Education is cognizant of the evolving nature of home and family life, religion and the community. We recognize that the lives of our young people are being shaped and determined by aspirations, needs and values which are different from those of previous generations...and we are seriously concerned about the decline in discipline among some of our students both in and out of school ... It has been determined that through the Code Of Discipline, disciplinary responses, practices and procedures will be consistent, reasonable, fair and equitable across all

schools. The Code of Discipline also seeks to ensure that the provisions in the Education Act and Regulations (1982) are effectively employed ...”

The Code of Discipline ensures that all students are afforded due process. For example, the student must be informed of the violation and must be given a chance to explain what happened and witnesses may be called. Of course, if the student is behaving in violent way, immediate measures will have to be taken to make the compound safe. There are three levels of violations. The first level includes first time violations and those that can be handled at the level of the school with a reprimand, a conduct card, a detention, referral to the Guidance Counsellor. Level two violations are more serious and include petty theft repeated disruptive behaviour and other infractions requiring serious intervention such as attendance at The Edna Nicholls Centre. Level Three violations include assault, harassment, violence and similar

actions which may require legal action. The levels include the schools' own rules and seek to provide added support for schools and parents in cases where students may need long-term rehabilitation. Violence in schools is totally unacceptable but we must guard against a narrow focus on get tough measures which promote greater anger and conflict. The Education Act is being revised to provide greater clarity on the roles of teachers, parents and students.

The missing link at this time is a National Council of Parent Teacher Associations whose members will continue to sit on our stakeholder committees as in the past. Schools cannot function without PTAs. I read somewhere that school leaders include principals, teachers and parents. The three together provide the raw material for building positive school cultures. Now that each school will have a Students' Council, it is to be hoped that students too will have an organized channel to

express their needs and concerns. We cannot continue in a state of attack with disgruntled staff and under-achieving students creating a school culture of negativity and hopelessness. If we are to have collegial improvement, then I am asking all members of the principals' and teachers' organizations to focus on those measures that will shape and build strong schools.

Strong school cultures exist:

- where staff have a shared sense of purpose
- where the underlying values are about collegiality, improvement and hard work
- where core values are communicated in what is said and done
- where rituals and traditions celebrate student accomplishment, teacher innovation and parental commitment
- where the school's heart and soul is noticeable and the law is tempered by its judicious use

- where respect is offered to each teacher, each parent and each child regardless of social status and background.

I wish to conclude by thanking all those Principals across the island who are giving exemplary service to this country's educational system; to those teachers who, in spite of the challenges, offer excellent teaching to the children in their charge; to those parents who have pulled their pockets to pay for added rooms, bought school furniture and teaching-learning materials so that children other than their own can benefit; to the ancillary staff who help to look after the personal needs of children and teachers without extra pay; to those students who make teaching rewarding by simply having a passion to learn.