

October 1st 2021

EDUCATING OUR CHILDREN IN THE MIDST OF A PANDEMIC

Introduction

Twenty years ago, when the Unity Labour Party government embarked on the education revolution, it was under no delusion about the gravity of the task ahead and the challenges that had to be overcome. The goal was to pave the way for a society that was trained, certified and necessary for the creation of the modern, competitive, many-sided, post-colonial economy that is was once local, regional and global. To achieve this, the government had to bring an end to the undesirable situation of having only 38% of the country's 12-year-olds getting a secondary education, train more teachers, increase the number of Vincentians accessing post-secondary and university education and provide or early-childhood education. All reasonable observers would agree that our accomplishments in education as a nation over the last twenty years have been nothing short of remarkable, and while this is so we continue to build on that solid foundation as the work is not yet complete. The challenges to educating our students during the Covid-19 pandemic continue to demand of the Ministry of Education, and the government as a whole creativity and innovation in problem solving. Proper management of the pandemic so far did allow for face-to-face learning for the first two terms of the 2020/21 school year, with online learning used for the third term, due also in part to the eruption of La Soufriere volcano. Despite those disruptions, our primary school students achieved excellent results at this year's CPEA exams with a pass rate of over 83%, and we look forward to positive results from those students who

sat the CSEC and CAPE exams. The hard work and dedication of our teachers, the focus of the children, the support from parents and the planning from the Ministry of Education came together to produce positive results that we can be proud of.

Preparation for the 2021/22 Academic year

The Ministry had set October 4, 2021 as the date for the start of the 2021/22 academic year and work towards having things in place to achieve this start date. Repair work was carried out on schools across the country with three new facilities constructed to temporarily house students from three schools undergoing extensive repairs that would not be completed in time for the new school year. The MoE consulted with stakeholders to determine the most efficient method to reopen school, given the challenges of the current spike in Covid-19 positive cases. Within the last week we have seen over 500 new Covid-19 cases and an additional 9 deaths related to the virus, a situation that raised concerns regarding the safety of our nation's children. The MoE has since taken the decision that for the first two weeks of the new term in the first instance, school would reopen using the online format, following which, it would move towards a blended approach for some schools depending on a number of factors. There would then be a further decision taken on the next step, based on the analysis of the situation and advice from the relevant officials. While most prefer the efficiency of face to face learning, this government guided by the science, must put the safety of our students, teachers and by extension their families and communities, first by ensuring that teaching/learning occurs in the safest environment. This is just another challenge that we must overcome in our continued implementation of the remarkable education revolution, and the government is committed to ensuring its success for the benefit of our nation and its people.

Vaccination Remains our Best Option

As we move towards the opening of school with the aim of eventually returning to face-to-face learning, stakeholders in education must recognise the need for those directly involved to protect themselves through vaccination. Teachers especially, who would interact with thousands of students daily as well as the wider community, have a responsibility to ensure that they are offering themselves and their students the best protection available. Vaccination remains the best tool in the toolkit to fight against Covid-19 and all teachers, with the exception of those with legitimate medical reasons are encouraged to get vaccinated as we accelerate our fight against the spread of this deadly virus. Other countries in the region have gone the route of mandating vaccines for teachers, while Barbados for example has seen a positive response to more than 75% of teachers who have taken the vaccines voluntary. Our teachers who currently have no such mandate are strongly encouraged to take the vaccine and parents of students who are eligible to be vaccinated are also encouraged to vaccinate their children. The distressing reality of countries around us: Grenada that has had 133 deaths so far in September alone and St. Lucia with 195 deaths, serve as grim reminders of what our reality can look like in a very short period. We have an opportunity to do something before the situation worsens and as we prepare for the start of the 2021/22 academic year, teachers and other stakeholders in education have the chance to play their part in this country's fight against the Covid-19 virus by getting vaccinated.

Conclusion

We have seen the remarkable impact of the education revolution on the transformation of our Vincentian society since it was implemented just 20 years ago. The improvement in living standards by many who previously lived in poverty as a direct result of improvements in their education is undeniable and the instances are widely

experienced across this country. It would be such a travesty if as a nation, we were to sacrifice these hard-fought gains on the altar of conspiracy theories, and partisan politics. The science is clear, the data is plain, vaccines work and currently represent the best option in our fight against Covid-19. As we prepare for the start of the new academic year, let's do our part to protect our future by ensuring a safe environment for learning to take place. Let's get vaccinated.