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National Development Strategy

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Towards the reform of the education system

What are the causes of the parlous condition of our educational system? Why is there such a high rate of functional illiteracy in our country? Why are so many of our graduates seemingly incapable of contributing to the development of our economy? Why are so many of the relatively few trained and qualified teachers in Guyana leaving their profession or emigrating? The basic reason is, of course, that since the late 1970s the sector has been starved of financial resources. And although there have been significant increases since the mid-1990s in the proportion of Government expenditure devoted to education, our national financial resource base is so meagre, and the education system so tattered, that the absolute amounts of money that are spent on education are woefully inadequate. Moreover, it can be argued that in our current circumstances the increased expenditure on education has been too heavily slanted on the construction and repair of buildings. As a result, not enough financial attention has been paid to teachers' salaries and to the nurturing of an environment that enhances their capacity to impart knowledge.

It cannot be too strongly emphasised that the education sector cannot be considered in a vacuum. If money is the main key to the system's development, it is essential that the government formulate and implement macroeconomic policies that would lead to the growth and diversification of our economy. The point is that the emphasis which successive governments have placed, since 1989, on stabilization, must now be accompanied by more pronounced economic expansionist policy measures. At the same time, our efforts to improve the efficiency of our revenue collection systems must be intensified. If these approaches were successful, total available revenue would be significantly increased. As important, the blatant inequity which is now ingrained in our tax collection practices, through which captive tax-paying public servants subsidize the education of the children of their richer business and farming colleagues, would be redressed. The NDS has, of course, stressed the importance of formulating policies that would both attract investors and provide fair returns to the country, and of placing greater macroeconomic emphasis on the expansion of the economy. Indeed, it has devised detailed strategies for the attainment of these objectives.

In regard to education specifically, the authors of the NDS state unequivocally that the salaries and other conditions of service of teachers at all levels of the system should be

improved. They assert that despite recent increases in the emoluments of primary and secondary school teachers, "conditions of service remain uncompetitive with respect to the packages offered by the local private sector and in overseas markets". They claim that salaries are also unattractive at the University of Guyana and that, as a result, "many teachers are forced to pursue outside opportunities at the expense of their students, and relevant research."

Against the background of an expanding revenue base, the NDS proposes that the "share of the national budget allocated to education (should) be raised continuously to 20 percent by 2005, and (should) be maintained at or about that level for the rest of the decade". It further recommends that "all current barriers to the establishment of private schools (should) be removed". It explains that by permitting private schools to absorb part of the student population, the resources available to the public system would yield higher levels of support per student. It also urges, in its desire to obtain as much income as possible to enhance the quality of education, that the examination subsidies that are now provided to CXC and GCE students be significantly reduced, except for the poorest families, and that the payment of even these reduced subsidies should be based on satisfactory performance by students at the national fourth form test.

The NDS recognizes a duty to provide the basic requirements of primary and secondary education free of charge. It is of the opinion, however, that there should be a strong element of cost-recovery at the University level. Accordingly, it recommends that university fees, as well as the student-loan scheme, should be maintained. Nevertheless, it takes into account the plight of the poverty-stricken in our society and prescribes that scholarships be provided to needy students.

An essential aspect of the funding strategy is the involvement of parents and other members of the community in the development of school-improvement plans, and in the mobilization of financial resources for their implementation. Indeed, it is specifically stated that schools should be encouraged, through incentive systems, to raise supplementary funds without prejudicing their regular allocations from the Ministry of Education.

In summary, the funding strategy for education is designed to enhance the flow of financial resources to the sector through increased government allotments, the establishment of private schools, the recovery of expenses from targeted groups, and the forging of partnerships with parents and other community members in fund-raising activities. This greater inflow of funds would enable a more effective concentration of educational expenditure on needy students and a reduction in the variations in the amount of spending per student which now exists among regions with similar characteristics. In addition to recommending that a significant proportion of these additional financial resources should be expended on teachers' salaries, the NDS specifically proposes that special allowances be given to those teachers who opt to serve in hinterland areas; that increments be based on performance alone; that incentives be provided for the attainment of appropriate relevant and additional academic and professional qualifications; and that appointments to particular positions and particular grades be given only to those who

possess the relevant revised qualifications.

In other words, it should not be assumed that merely being in the profession would automatically qualify a teacher, in the new scheme of things, to increased salaries and better conditions of service. These enhanced benefits must be earned through a combination of qualifications, experience and performance. It follows, therefore, that those persons, particularly at the University level, who possess "inadequate qualifications and experience" for the tasks they now perform, would have to seek other avenues of employment in due course. More specifically, the NDS states that the "University (should) establish and strictly enforce academic and experience requirements that are comparable to those obtained in the Caribbean, for the recruitment and promotion of its academic staff." *(To be continued)*