



**PRIME MINISTER HON. TILLMAN THOMAS
NATIONAL ADDRESS**

at the start of a new academic year

Aired on Radio & Television
September 10th, 2009



Fellow Citizens, As we commence a new academic year, I take this opportunity to speak to you on the importance of Education and its relevance to our development as a nation and indeed our Caribbean.

I wish to firstly commend and congratulate all our CXC students, teachers and parents for their collective efforts which resulted in an improved performance in this year's results. This performance I am sure, is directly related to greater efforts, improved focus and a renewed pursuit of excellence.

Education is widely acknowledged as a primary vehicle for economic and social advancement of individuals and countries. It presents many opportunities and possibilities for change. In fact, the future prosperity and survival of our country and our Caribbean region, depends to a large extent upon the **quality of our education system, its appropriateness and its suitability** to the future job market emerging in the region and the world.

As new possibilities emerge in Research, Technological Innovations, Creativity in Music, the Art Forms, Sports, Architecture and Design, we must find ways to competitively participate in the **"Global village"**.

Fellow citizens, our goal is to build a 21st Century Grenada and Caribbean that must offer to the world, competitive Tourist Destinations, Business Opportunities, Yachting Facilities, agro based products and other quality products and services. We must emerge as an area of high productivity, high potential and professionalism.

The World Bank in its 2008 publication on Work and Education in the OECS, has released statistics to show the clear relationship between poverty and education in the OECS. The study notes that the average earnings of a 24 year old man in the Eastern Caribbean, who only completed primary school in the year 2001 was found to be EC\$5,400. Those with secondary education, and post secondary education courses, earned 80% more than that at the Primary level.

At the same time, the same age group male with tertiary education training earned 324 % more per annum. What this means, is that there are high returns for investing in education. The higher a persons level of education, the greater will be that person's prospect of achieving social and economic progress.

Ladies and Gentlemen, our Government is committed to ensuring that all citizens have access to relevant education that prepares them for a productive and fulfilling life. As our education levels improve, so too will our ability to think innovatively, solve problems creatively and to design and implement appropriate technologies to suit our own circumstances. We will be able to pursue added value from our primary products such as nutmegs, developing our tourism skills and craft products, developing our music, performing and visual arts to professional standards.

Ladies and gentlemen, our Caribbean is changing. A shift has been emerging with a focus on skills development; business and entrepreneurship skills, and personal development skills for employment. In Grenada's case, there is cause for concern. According to the World Bank 2008 report, Grenada currently has the highest skills gap in the hemisphere estimated at 41%. This means that we have not been training our young people with the skills needed by the marketplace. Over the years we have allowed the system to slip. Many of our young people are not suited to the job market and are unable to function effectively in the work place.

Reports have also revealed that our children lack the technical skills and personal skills like positive attitudes, team building, communication skills, values, conflict resolution, anger management and critical thinking. These deficiencies inhibit them from being employed for up to 15 or more months after leaving school.

If we are to address these problems, we must refocus the educational system to reflect the demands of the job market.

- We must move our education system from “learning by rote” to a “problem solving approach”.
- We must turn around the educational ship so that it moves in the right direction.
- We must instill in our children good values and principles that would guide their moral, ethical and spiritual development.

Principles and values that would teach them good business and entrepreneurship skills; so that some would not have to depend on established institutions for a job but could be self employed and as a result generate employment for others.

- Our students must begin to explore nontraditional careers.

The Caribbean Examination Council now offers subject areas such as the Performing Arts, Physical Education, Sports and the Visual Arts.

- They must develop their technical skills along with the regular academic skills because the predictions are that job opportunities for the next thirty years in the Caribbean will require technical skills.
- We must produce children who are better suited to the job market with better technical skills and better personal development skills.

Institutions like NEWLO are to be commended for their foresight in this regard. Those secondary schools that have recognized the change and implemented them, I commend you.

- We need to provide more tertiary level education for our people.

It is instructive to note that Professor Hilary Beckles of the University of the West Indies (UWI), Cave Hill, in an address to the Ministers of Education of the region in April 2009 said the following: “it is the policy of free tertiary education at UWI to all Barbadians that has made the difference in the levels of economic growth and development between Barbados and their neighboring Eastern Caribbean Islands.”

So the evidence is clear. We need to make major changes.

To this end, we have given full support to St. Georges University (SGU). They have assisted us in developing specialist degrees such as counseling, and supported fully other development degree areas relevant to the region. We have asked them to develop degree options specifically for Teachers that can be done during the summer and other recesses and at reasonable cost for our teachers.

- We intend to continue on the expansion plans for the T.A. Marryshow Community College (TAMCC) and to support it as the premier tertiary education institution for Grenada.
- We are moving expeditiously with plans to develop a U.W.I. Open Campus Facility here in Grenada that would accommodate not only degree programs but would offer research facilities for Masters and Doctoral Dissertations. We are assured that this could happen within a three year time frame.
- Our Scholarship Desk will continue to assist students to access grants, scholarships and other tertiary level opportunities.
- Our teachers must all complete degrees and be able to maximize the training opportunities offered through CARICOM and U.W.I. and other institutions.

“An Education System cannot rise above the level of its Teachers” as enunciated by the World Conference on Inclusive Education in Geneva 2008.

This means that our teachers must become qualified to the accepted standards that now prevail in most of our islands. Every effort to assist will be given by the Ministry of Education.

- Our Early Childhood Desk and Team must come alive to the needs for early stimulation of our children in a far more productive way than is currently done in the Day Care Centre and Pre-schools.

I am pleased to report that 31 of our Early Childhood Educators are being put through degree programmes from September 2008 Academic Year at the Shortwood Teachers College in Jamaica, arranged through the Ministry of Education with World Bank funding.

- Special Education now referred to as Inclusive Education must support the needs of our children with mild to moderate learning disabilities in the regular school system and must support those with severe learning disabilities.
- We will continue to improve the management of our free school books programme to ensure effective delivery. This programme is enhancing educational access to all our children as well as placing much needed disposable income in the hands of all parents and guardians.

Our children must have every opportunity to become productive citizens and to help us build this nation. Ladies and Gentlemen it is the beginning of another school year and also the beginning of a new revolutionary approach to Education. Our current Curriculum refocus is designed to put us on the right track.

For us to succeed, everyone must be involved and must support.

Our Parents and all our communities must support our principals and our Ministry of Education. Our Church Boards must become more actively involved in assuming responsibility for our schools along with the Ministry.

Our students in particular must work harder, become more disciplined and motivated.

Let us become a beacon of light for the small islands in Education. Let us lead the change that needs to happen in our system. Let us be prepared as CSME comes on stream. With the free movement of professional persons, we must be ready to maximize all employment opportunities.

The Ministry of Education had declared 2010 as the "Year of the Facilities" in order to focus all our efforts on this important area. This is coming on the heels of our focus on the "Year of the Curriculum" in 2009. As we collectively forge forward, I urge all Grenadians to actively support the work of the Ministry of Education and our government in our continued thrust towards the development of our Nation.

I thank you and may God Bless our nation.