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National Development Strategy

by Kenneth King

Towards the reform of the education system

continued from last week

The NDS is, of course, very much concerned about the high incidence of functional illiteracy in Guyana. As it movingly states “today’s unqualified or underqualified teachers are the products of yesterday’s classrooms. The nation cannot wait ten years to see improvement in the functional literacy levels of today’s six-year olds, while at the same time seeing its stock of functionally illiterate out-of-school youth and adults increase. To break the cycle, emphasis (should) be placed on securing appropriate literacy and numeracy skills throughout the system.” It recommends that there should be an attack on illiteracy on several fronts, and that this onslaught should include the testing for literacy skills and the building-in of remedial programmes well in advance of CXC examinations. It stresses that the eradication of functional illiteracy from Guyana should be “the premier priority for the first decade of the 21st century.”

To this end, and in order to improve the quality of primary education in general, the NDS stipulates that the percentage of primary teachers who are professionally trained should be increased annually, so that the proportion of trained teachers by the year 2010 would be at least 80 per cent. It also strongly suggests that distance learning methods of in-service training be utilized, as well as the regular programme of the CPCE; that a system for the continuous assessment of student performance be put in place; that teaching guides be made available to all primary school teachers; and that the inspection of schools by qualified and experienced personnel be intensified. Of the greatest importance is the proposal that curricula relevant to the lives of students should be developed: at least one foreign language should be introduced at this level, there should be training in the use of computers; and the development of life skills or problem-solving abilities should be initiated. The NDS also recommends that values, moral underpinnings, and the attributes of good citizenship should be stressed.

For secondary level education, the NDS makes a number of specific suggestions: community high school programmes should be extended by one year, the first year to be used for repeat and remedial work in language, mathematics and science, as a first step to the unification of GSS, CHS, and the secondary departments of primary schools; Spanish should be incorporated into the curriculum; there should be more intensive training on computers; more attention should be devoted to technical and vocational subjects and general life-skills; guidelines should be

prepared to help students to develop cognitive learning skills; teachers should be trained to foster analytical skills and critical thinking, and to set questions that test all levels of the cognitive domain; and qualified persons should be engaged to give guidance and care to students and families who require assistance on a range of social and economic matters.

The NDS recommends that new teacher training centres at the regional level should be established, and that greater use be made of existing global distance-training modalities, for the specific purpose of teacher training in Guyana. Although stressing the necessity rapidly to increase the number of trained teachers in the country, it also urges that the entry requirements for teacher training should be tightened. It makes the case for the imparting of knowledge to trainees on the use of modern technology, and on the techniques for teaching foreign languages and conducting remedial classes. It is adamant that teacher training programmes should emphasise the fundamentals of literacy and numeracy, the necessity for teachers to expose their students to the analytical methods to be utilized in problem-solving, the importance of inculcating self-esteem and self-worth in students, and the special approaches that ought to be followed in the presentation of racial, ethnic, religious and other sensitive issues. The NDS is quite specific that instructions in the teaching of English as a second language should be provided at Teachers' Colleges. Indeed, it insists that success in this subject should be a requirement for certification.

The strategy that has been devised for the development of the University of Guyana is dependent, in large part, on an increase in the finances that are available to it, and the consequent improvement of the quality of its academic staff and the learning materials and physical facilities that are available to its students. In addition, the authors of the NDS are of the opinion that the University does not possess that degree of autonomy that is afforded to most other Universities throughout the world.

Against this background, they have proposed that (i) the university Council should be appointed by a broad-based body which would include the government, the opposition parties, representatives of religious bodies, the private sector, and the trade unions; (ii) a predictable, reliable level of subvention to the University, based on an agreed formula, should be maintained over the long term; and (iii) the University should seek a more viable and cost-effective grouping of courses.

The overarching premise of the strategy is that after UG raises its standards to international levels it would be able to enter into meaningful relationships with UWI, and to establish its own reputation in particular areas. The NDS therefore proposes that the University should develop a long-term plan for the future exchange of students with UWI, and for the establishment of centres of excellence, (for example in forestry, geology and mining, and fisheries) which could draw students from the Caribbean and elsewhere.

The authors of the NDS are fully cognizant of the important role which science and technology would inevitably play in the future development of Guyana. Accordingly, in addition to prescribing that more teachers should be trained in the teaching of these disciplines at all levels, and that a significant proportion of our financial resources should be expended on science and technology laboratories and other facilities, they recommend that a special pre-university science course should be established at the University in order to increase its intake of students for

training in these fields.

The NDS also pays special attention to technical and vocational education and training. It recommends the establishment of a tripartite council, comprising representatives of the trades unions, the private sector and the government to provide guidance on the management and administration of this aspect of development. And it suggests that the operations of the whole technical and vocational system be rationalised, particularly to take advantage of GUYSUCO's technical institutes which should be remodelled to provide training to a wider cross-section of students. It urges that special emphasis be given to the running of short courses in rural areas on topics with the potential to enhance the incomes of farmers, and that the geographical coverage of technical and vocational education and training be widened and made more accessible to hinterland communities.

The NDS places great emphasis on the necessity to provide training in entrepreneurship at primary, secondary and tertiary institutions. It devotes a special chapter to information technology.

The NDS provides a comprehensive blue print for the future development of education in Guyana. Because the education system is, in many respects, in crisis, it is incumbent upon the new Minister of Education to take the necessary steps to transform the strategy into implementable programmes and projects. This he should do expeditiously. We cannot hope to develop our country successfully, and to compete effectively in an increasingly globalised world, unless we radically reform our education sector, and produce knowledgeable, analytical and creative citizens. ([Back to top](#))