

TTUTA ON TUESDAY (16.01.18)

CREATING SUCCESSFUL SCHOOLS

TTUTA writes a weekly column for the Newsday called TTUTA on Tuesday.

As we strive to reform our education system to meet the needs of our society, we must be clear about the standards to which we must aspire. Many education researchers have weighed in on this issue over time and it would be worthwhile to articulate some of these ideals in our quest to make our education system more meaningful and relevant. Despite the false boasts of some education quarters, our school system continues to fail us as a society from both a social and economic perspective.

Being student-centred is a much touted concept, but unfortunately, despite our best efforts, this remains elusive to our exam-oriented education system. Student-centredness demands that the needs of all students must be considered in the modus operandi of the school. It also presupposes inclusive practices.

This is hardly the case in the current scenario. The majority of our students do not have the necessary perquisites to succeed in the high-stakes examinations that characterise our system. As a result, they are left behind to be certified as failures.

Being student-centred means the existence of social support networks to assist marginalised and disadvantaged students with social deficits. Such student-needs must be given priority over other concerns. It means meaningfully incorporating their needs in school affairs in an atmosphere of cooperation and trust with a high level of interaction between student and teacher. Successful schools ensure that education needs are customised.

A wide diversity of academic programmes that are relevant to the needs of students must also be offered in successful schools. These programmes must excite the learners and be able to appeal to both higher and lower-order levels of learning, leading to meaningful engagement. Such programmes, delivered using appropriate technologies, must provide in-depth coverage of content and simultaneously monitor student progress and give appropriate and timely feedback.

A firm belief in the dictum that all students can learn must form the foundation of any academic programme. This provides the impetus for the practice of professional autonomy by teachers in their desire to ensure that instruction is effective and student learning outcomes remain the focus of all that happens in the school.

Teachers must consistently communicate these high expectations to students, inspiring them to believe in themselves at all times. They must be constantly reminded that they are capable of success through hard work, dedication, commitment and persistence despite the odds. They must be taught to believe in themselves. Teachers in successful schools must believe in their charges. Their practice must be rooted in the philosophy of being an agent of change.

At the administrative level, schools must have a clear organisational personality, characterised by clearly stated vision, mission, goals, values, and standards of performance. There must be a visible sense of order, purpose, and direction fostered by consistency among teachers. Collaboration and teamwork must be evident among school officials, with systems in place to recognise and reward performance on the part of both teachers and staff. The learning environment must be open, friendly and culturally inviting.

Community resources must be actively mobilised to ensure involvement and engagement by stakeholders. Successful schools must take their mandate from the communities they serve, thereby reflecting the hopes, dreams, ambitions and aspirations of the community. The school being an agent of community development must be prepared to adapt and adjust prescribed curricula to suit the peculiar needs of communities. This can only be achieved through meaningful stakeholder participation and involvement. Schools cannot exist in isolation of the community. School leaders must understand this and make the necessary adjustments in their governance arrangements to facilitate this.

Professionalism must not just be a convenient cliché. Teachers must acknowledge at all times their responsibility to be professional in their practice. This begins with their recognition that they are self-directed life-long learners. Their quest to become better must be constant.

Reflective practice must be integral to their work. Accountability to stakeholders must be

voluntary and characteristic to their practice. The alignment of practice to student needs must be ongoing and constant. Teamwork, collegiality and collaboration are imperatives of successful schools. Finally, successful schools are characterised by shared leadership. Principals must recognise the collective intellectual capital present in the school and be prepared and willing to harness this pool of knowledge in the process of leadership. Ownership by teachers and school personnel is critical to the achievement of school goals and objectives.