

TTUTA ON TUESDAY (19.12.17)

In Pursuit of Quality Education

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

If the nation's schools are to provide quality education, quality tools, quality resources and quality teachers must be consistent pillars of the education system. Schools must thus be of a certain standard where the health and safety of both students and staff are not threatened or compromised in any way.

The laws of the land stipulate certain quality standards that must be adhered to and school personnel are well within their rights to demand that these standards are not compromised in any shape or form.

Unfortunately, many of the nation's schools are not up to the requisite health and safety standards nor are they up to the standards required for the delivery of modern education. The average classroom is still reflective of the antiquated approaches to education, despite the large sums of money that have been expended in education over the decades.

Quality education can only take place in quality environments, beginning with an ambience that is aesthetically appealing, comfortable, and conducive to learning.

Our schools continue to be plagued with problems of malfunctioning sewer systems, faulty/antiquated electrical systems, limited information and communication technologies, broken and deficient furniture, leaking roofs and shortages of teaching resources.

These realities make, at best, for the delivery of very basic education, to the detriment of our national quest to develop quality human capital. It is no wonder that so many of the nation's schools remain closed or are partially functioning.

School administrators are being forced to contend with these problems, or at best improvise in order to keep schools functional. The capacity of the Ministry of Education to conduct routine

repairs/improvements to schools remains severely handicapped due to a combination of bureaucracy and misplaced resource priority.

To date monies and supplies have not been released to schools for the current financial year. School officials have been forced to appeal to the generosity of stakeholders in order to keep schools open. An overly centralised accounting system also limits the autonomy and flexibility of school personnel to manage their schools, further compounding the problem.

Support staff, for example ICT technicians, student aides, guidance officers and social workers, are being gradually removed from schools owing to the non-renewal of contracts. At best some people have been placed on month-to-month contracts. These people perform a critical function in the delivery of quality education, since they augment the efforts of teachers in curriculum delivery. It is critical that such people are present in schools on a permanent basis since our entire education system is being severely compromised by their absence. This is an untenable situation that requires the attention of the national community since it compromises the very future of the country. If schools are to be given a fighting chance, given the country's current financial predicament there must be reprioritising of scarce resources to ensure that schools can deliver on their mandate.

Communicating the challenges being encountered by the Ministry of Education in a genuine way to stakeholders and school personnel in particular will assist in devising solutions to the problem of resource adequacy for the functioning of schools. The silence of the authorities is deafening. When pressed for explanations and answers regarding their inability to treat with issues, broken promises have become the norm.

Largesse, wastage and allegations of corruption characterised the education system for a long time, severely compromising its capacity for quality. It has now gone into the other extreme where the scarcity of resources is the current handicap. While no one doubts the current realities, the approach to treating with the problem remains vexatious and contentious.

Keeping a clean political face seems to be the priority for those at the helm and this approach has spawned a contemptuous offshoot. It is unfortunate that education continues to be held to ransom

by politicians both past and present. It is no wonder that quality education continues to elude us as a nation despite the huge sums invested over the past 40 years.

In going forward it is hoped that the stakeholders can all engage in honest, sincere and frank dialogue on the issues impacting negatively on the nation's schools so that collectively, creative solutions can be devised or found to treat with them.

Priority must be given to the provision of quality tools and resources if we are to ensure that we deliver quality education. Cuts in education don't heal. It retards our capacity to become a knowledge society. Stakeholders must also recognise that wastage and extravagance must be eliminated along with increased output