



NATIONAL ADDRESS SPEECH

BY

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**FOR THE
RETURN TO SCHOOL CAMPUSES**

**23RD JANUARY, 2022
8:00 PM**

My fellow Bahamians, brothers and sisters good evening.

I speak to you tonight, on the eve of our children returning to classrooms nationally for face to face instruction, in the hybrid model. For public school students, this will be for the first time they will be returning to campus, in many months and for some the first time in two years.

I think it is important to establish, at the outset, that COVID 19 is more than a public health crisis. It has also created what is likely to be a more enduring crisis in education which will likely have serious impact long after the last days of this pandemic. These serious impacts relate to the quality of life many of our children will experience and last well into adulthood. Also the state of our collective progress and our social and economic health as a Bahamian people.

So, I begin at the outset by declaring this is not about me or you, except to the extent that we are called upon to fully understand this crisis and to respond appropriately in our responsibility to future generations; to create appropriate policies and responses for our children.

There has been much research globally on the impact of COVID 19 on education. Countries everywhere are facing identical challenges and similar prospects. The potential outcomes for countries such as ours however, are much direr unless we are resolute in our pursuit of a focused, selfless course of action to reverse and avert what will otherwise be a devastating blow to our future prospects as a Bahamian people. We are in an emergency. There is no time or space for old strategies or stale responses. We do not have the luxury. So it is necessary that there is a collective consciousness of where we are - the circumstances are risk-filled.

Secondly, we must have a collective commitment to fight ourselves out of this dilemma and do all that we must to save our children. The last two years have seen unrelenting disruptions in education. The fully virtual learning experience has proven to be difficult for students, teachers and parents alike, for a variety of reasons. This has been especially so for children with special needs and children from lower economic communities. We also know that thousands of children have fully fallen off the radar having been absent from school for two years. These children span the range of preschool to grade 12. Where are these children now? And what will be their fate? We are in an emergency.

In a recent UNESCO UNICEF and World Bank joint report the question is asked: “How should decision makers and the international community respond to the growing global education crisis? The answer: reopening schools and keeping them open, must be the top priority globally. The report stated that:

“While nearly every country in the world offered remote learning opportunities for students, the quality and reach of such initiatives varied, and in most cases, they offered a poor substitute for in-person instruction. Stemming and reversing learning losses, especially for the most vulnerable students, requires in-person schooling.”

Every week lost in learning is damaging to our children. For this reason, the Davis Administration has always remained insistent on the need to open schools for face-to-face learning. We were initially held up by the fact that the previous administration had not made progress on school repairs, during the time of school closures. We acted on that issue immediately and were set to resume in-person learning on January 11th.

Well, as we all know, that plan was delayed by the emergence of the highly contagious Omicron variant that resulted in record levels of COVID-19 infections throughout the country. We could not simply allow schools to reopen without considering this new threat. The Ministry of Education regrouped, planned and collaborated with the Ministry of Health to come up with a hybrid approach, that we believe allows for in-person learning to be conducted as safely as possible.

I want to be clear – we fully expected that the necessary preparations were being made for the January 11th re-opening, and when that re-opening was postponed, the Minister of Health, myself and the Prime Minister, all made it clear that we did not anticipate that the re-opening would be delayed for very long and that the country should brace for an imminent return to school.

At the end of December, I stated that we expected the planned January 11th re-opening to be postponed by two weeks as we initiated further mitigation efforts to ensure that schools could re-open safely. On January 11th, in a conversation with the media at Sybil Strachan Primary, the Prime Minister indicated to the media that he expected schools to be re-opened within two weeks. January 24th makes 13 days since the Prime Minister made that statement. So said, so done.

We then provided an update, several days in advance of the reopening on the 24th. Given

the government's repeated communications to the public regarding the fact that the timeline for schools to re-open would be in a matter of weeks, we fully expected that educational professionals remained ready for the eventual return to the classroom.

The timeline may be a bit truncated for some and we acknowledge that. But we must also acknowledge that we are in the midst of an educational crisis that demands a degree of urgency, especially given the delay that occurred on January 11th. Every day that our children remain out of school does further damage. The time to return to in-person learning is now. We are not living in ideal times but we must do the best.

Once we learned that the Ministry of Health and Wellness endorsed a school reopening by Monday January 24th it was announced that public schools would reopen for face to face education. The private schools have followed suit. There is no time to waste.

This first week, commencing 24th January, has been deemed a transitional week allowing each individual school administration, teachers, students and parents to reacclimatize to face to face instruction. In the first phase children who do not have uniforms are free to come to school appropriately dressed. Going forward, we will work closely with the Ministry of Social Services to assure that children needing assistance are able to access same in efficient manner.

My brothers and sisters, we must get our children back into the classroom safely. In this regard, we have been fully guided by the manual and procedures outlined by the Ministry of Health and Wellness, as to on campus protocols, inclusive of the reduction in the number of students allowed on campus at any given time, mandatory mask wearing, ventilation including maximized use of outdoors, mandatory social distancing, continuous observation and isolation where necessary.

Additionally, the Ministry of Health and Wellness has initiated free testing, which children and teachers and all other stakeholders can access. In these circumstances, global evidence shows, children can resume in-person learning safely. This is where we know the process can begin for effective learning recovery and accelerated learning. This is where hope is restored and where we roll up our sleeves to ameliorate the fallout of COVID 19 on education.

The Ministry of Education and Technical and Vocational Training has in development a number of strategies which include diagnostic testing of every child in public school to

ascertain the extent of learning loss. A Learning Recovery committee has been established by the Ministry to provide recommendations and develop strategies for appropriate responses and learning recovery programmes, based on the extent of learning loss of each child. These programmes, will focus primarily on the foundations of literacy and numeracy. This emergency is also an opportunity to redress the many long standing deficiencies in our education system.

In the joint research, previously referred to, some valuable guidance is given to bring a focus on six areas:

1. Assessing student learning so instruction can be targeted to students' learning levels and specific needs.
2. Investing in digital learning opportunities for all students, ensuring that technology is fit for purpose and focused on enhancing human interactions.
3. Reinforcing support that leverages the role of parents, families, and communities in children's learning.
4. Ensuring that teachers are supported and have access to practical, high-quality professional development opportunities, teaching guides and learning materials.
5. Increasing the share of education in the national budget allocation of stimulus packages and tying it to investments mentioned above that can accelerate learning.
6. Investing in evidence building - in particular, implementation research, to understand what works and how to scale what works to the system level.

In relation to the latter point, we have commissioned a study by the University of The Bahamas, now underway, to identify causative factors for learning outcomes in this country. The findings of this research will help guide future education policy for more positive student attainment.

Additionally, the Ministry has established a task force, which has the responsibility of identifying all of the children who have been missing from school for extended periods - most of them for as much as two years - physically find these children and facilitate appropriate interventions to address learning loss and accelerate learning.

For older children, this may require engagement with tertiary institutions for special programmes. That task force comprises education professionals, including special education, school psychological services, Ministry of Social Services and Urban Development, Office of the Attorney General, The Bahamas Christian Council, Ministry of Health and Wellness, BYVI, NTA, representatives of the Bahamas Educators Managerial Union, Bahamas Union of Teachers, Bahamas Education Counsellors and Allied Workers Union.

The launch of its work commenced several days ago in the Freetown Community and will shortly spread out nationwide. We have tasked ourselves to complete the identification of and intervention for these children in the shortest possible time.

As previously stated, on taking office four months ago, we encountered a very anemic approach to Summer School repairs, with repairs limping along long after the summer break and in some cases with no end in sight. This has posed yet another challenge however, the collaborative efforts of the Ministry of Works, Ministry of Finance, the commitment of individual contractors and the Prime Minister himself, has resulted in an impressive acceleration of these works; most especially seen at Sybil Strachan Primary, CW Sawyer Primary, Yellow Elder Primary and LW Young Jr High Schools.

I am advised however, that recent discoveries, in the last 72 hours by the Ministry of Works, at TA Thompson Jr High School and at Uriah McPhee Primary School, may require that in the short term, some students will have to remain in virtual learning. We are maintaining very close contact with the Ministry of Works and monitoring the progress of these works, so as to gain a full understanding of what alternative strategies must be deployed.

However, it has become clear that many of our school plants are aging and suffering from a failure to maintain and it is evident that what is ahead is a massive undertaking. We will therefore implement new strategies to cause for ongoing maintenance of our school plants, to counter historic neglect, resulting in huge capital outlays, delays and school closures.

Since taking office in late September and understanding that success in education requires the synergistic engagement of all stakeholders. I have met by zoom with over 3000 of our teachers and education professionals nationwide and with principals, vice principals and district superintendents to understand firsthand their concerns, their ideas and vision for education. This has proven to be an invaluable process and will form the basis for future dialogue and new strategies, to enhance morale and wellbeing and positive productivity.

I have also mandated a revision of the High School Diploma requirements and curriculum reform, inclusive of a focus on literacy and numeracy, an enhanced platform for technical and vocational training, a more developed physical education programme, a feeder programme for the creative arts into a new tertiary institute for the performing arts now being developed; a new history curriculum with emphasis on Bahamian history founded

upon character development and an encouraged critical thinking. We are recruiting new teachers to address shortages, with an emphasis on priority areas.

But as pointed out by UNESCO:

“It is time to shift from crisis response to learning recovery. We must make sure that investments and actions for learning recovery lay the foundations for more efficient, equitable, and resilient education systems—systems that truly deliver learning and well-being for all children and youth. Only then can we ensure learning continuity in the face of future disruption”

My brothers and sisters - Our children must be all that they can be. This is not about me. This is about the children. This is about the next generation.

I know that many parents are anxious and even worried about what the future holds for their children. We must partner to ensure that your children are given the best opportunity possible. We pledge to do all that we can to achieve positive and even outstanding results for your children.

I wish to thank the educators and specialized support professionals of this nation for your steadfast love and commitment to the building of our children. And I expect and appreciate the support of our teachers during this time. I know your job is not easy. I know that the past two years have been filled with lots of ups and downs and uncertainty.

Our duty now is to take these critical steps towards certainty and normalcy. That begins with the introduction of the hybrid learning model that we are implementing, and we hope to transition to full-on in-person learning when it is safe to do so. We are taking this step so that we can lessen the current educational crisis and save a generation of our children, especially the most economically vulnerable, from irreparable learning loss. I am sure that this is something that every education professional can appreciate and get behind.

I look forward to working with you all to make this happen over the course of the next week. We pledge to improving effective communication between ourselves. Please know you have, in this Davis administration, a government which fully appreciates and understands your essential role in national development. You have in me a full partner, working with you to enhance and improve your profession.

To the wider Bahamian community, we have eyes and ears and we see the signals happening in this country. We must unify on the fundamentals and purposefully work together to take our country forward positively.

My brothers and sisters, the road ahead is not easy, but we cannot and must not fail. We will not fail. We will cause our precious children can be all that they can be. That they are free to develop their God-given gifts. That they are literate, ethical, confident, proud and powerful, physically and mentally healthy and imbued with an enlightened consciousness of who they are.

I ask all of you to join hands with us as we embark on this very important and sensitive undertaking. I pledge to remain faithful and steadfast in my constitutional duty and as an empowered citizen of this beautiful nation.

I end by repeating Psalm 30:5 where we are instructed that “weeping may endure for a night but joy cometh in the morning.” May God forever cause his face to shine upon our nation, especially the beautiful children of this nation.

I thank you and good night.