



Government of Bermuda
Ministry of Education

To the House of Assembly
By
The Hon. E. Wayne Scott, JP, MP
Minister of Education

Ministerial Statement
School Reorganisation Decision

Date: Friday June 17th, 2016

Mr. Speaker,

This morning I want to provide this Honourable House with greater insight into my decision on school reorganisation. However, let me first say that the education of our children is always at the fore front of my mind to ensure that every decision made has a positive impact on their learning and success.

Earlier this year we consulted on the SCORE Report and held consultation meetings on the report's findings and recommendations. There were over 60 submissions received from our children, parents, school PTAs, school alumni, teachers, principals and concerned members of our community. Each submission was reviewed and considered, along with the comments and questions shared during the consultation meetings. It was important to understand what our parents were saying about their children, about their schools and about their communities.

Mr. Speaker,

The feedback received was immense and thoughtful; and helped me come to my decision on school reorganisation in that I will not close schools, and the consideration of such, should not happen until an education strategy is developed that will form a blueprint for the direction of the Bermuda Public School System.

This is consistent with the findings of the SCORE Report, which pointed to the need to develop a clearer direction of where our public school system is headed. It is also supported by consultation submissions.

Mr. Speaker,

Our future decisions and initiatives should all be aligned with the strategic direction of the public school system. Having said that, my decision for school reorganisation is fivefold. We will:

- Develop a strategic plan for the public school system, inclusive of a review of the organisational structure of the Department of Education;
- Further develop and execute on the schedule for improvement of the exterior and interior of all school buildings, with the safety and health of our students being a critical priority;
- Ensure that all primary schools are equipped with holistic programmes and services that include music, art, physical education, etc;
- Relocate preschools to primary schools, where feasible; and,
- Consider the re-purposing of one of our schools as an alternative learning centre for the provision of services for students who require comprehensive alternative education. A secondary benefit of this option could be that the Ministry of Education is housed within this repurposed facility, ensuring that the people in charge of our children are physically located with our children.

Mr. Speaker,

The Ministry of Education will start the process of engaging stakeholders and putting together action plans to address all of these areas. However, let me now expand briefly on each of these areas which are a direct reflection of what our stakeholders have called for, in their consultation submissions.

Mr. Speaker,

I believe that addressing the issues of greatest concern to me as the Minister of Education and to our stakeholders of the public education system should be achieved through a comprehensive strategic planning process, and not through school reorganisation alone. The 2010/2015 Blueprint for Education ended in June 2015. A new strategic plan is required to steer specific decisions affecting the public school system. Quoting from one of our stakeholder submissions emphasising the need for a strategic plan, they stated: *“it is not money, larger schools or demographic trends that carry the most weight, but careful consideration of the needs of our students, our system, the ethos of our system, and the very best way to get us there”*.

The early stages of a strategic planning process are unfolding. As per its responsibilities under the Education Act, the Board of Education will be taking the lead to form a strategic planning team inclusive of all stakeholders who will work towards the formulation of a clear visionary direction for public school education; with the plan of implementing it during the 2017/18 school year. The process will be collaborative so that everyone involved in public school education has a clear picture of what we collectively want to achieve and where we want to go as an educational system. I believe that the strategic planning process is the first start to grow and improve our public school system. A review of the organizational structure of the Department of Education will be a part of this plan.

Mr. Speaker,

While some of our system needs can wait and be considered as part of the strategic plan, addressing urgent concerns such as our school facilities cannot. I share the concern with many stakeholders regarding school safety, health, security and physical accessibility. These issues are longstanding, but a plan is in place to address safety and health. Improving physical accessibility is significantly more challenging, but the findings of the SCORE Report and consultation submissions have helped raise its importance on our agenda.

Last month, a maintenance schedule for schools was posted on the Ministry website for the general public. Each school Principal is aware of the improvements scheduled for their respective school buildings and have shared this with their PTAs. In collaboration with the Ministry of Public Works plans have been developed to complete as much work as possible during the summer break. We are also working to make sure the improvements are sustained over time. Similarly, there were noted suggestions to secure more outside investment in schools from community partners and corporate sponsorships.

Mr. Speaker,

The third area of my decision for school reorganisation is to ensure all primary schools currently receive holistic programmes and services. As I have said before, one of my greatest ambitions as Minister is to provide consistency and equitable programming across all primary schools. Gaps in staffing, programming and services were raised by a number of stakeholders, and it is imperative that we continue to look at how to address and improve in this area. All children should

have equal access and benefits to a comprehensive and high quality education. The concerns of fairness and equity regarding our primary schools resonated with me because my interest has always been that all children have access to the same educational opportunities. Our technical officers will assess this in greater depth in the year ahead.

Mr. Speaker,

Relocating preschools to primary schools was raised once again in the submissions from stakeholders. I will relocate more preschools into primary schools, where feasible. My Honourable colleagues will recall that last summer two preschools were relocated to primary school sites. This is working out well showing a positive effect on enrolment for the primary schools. We will make an effort to continue this approach and move preschools closer to primary schools, where possible.

As an aside, as this is not directly related to the relocation of preschools, I wish to state here that while I am concerned with overutilisation in some of primary schools, I do not believe that a 40 square foot requirement for each child is needed for effective learning. However, I do believe that we can and should take a deeper look at how to improve utilisation from school to school. This may mean no longer taking a blanket approach to class size, when each school has classrooms with different sizes and which have different configurations.

Mr. Speaker,

The fifth area of my decision is to establish an alternative learning centre. When reviewing the submissions, there was a call for the introduction of a new centrally located educational centre to house comprehensive alternative education programming and services; and for the relocation of the Ministry of Education. I support this recommendation as it would help the Ministry increase its specialist services to some of our students with the greatest need. Also, moving the Ministry of Education back into a central area would reduce non-productive travel time for officers and facilitate greater time in the schools where they are most needed. It will also give parents and other stakeholders greater accessibility to Ministry staff.

Mr. Speaker,

In closing, I say thank you once again to everyone who participated in the SCORE consultation process. The responses have made an important difference in my decision-making and will become a resource within the strategic planning process. The voices of our stakeholders matter; and I encourage their continued involvement in education so that we work together to invest in our public school system for a better Bermuda where generations to come will thrive.

Thank you !