



Government of Bermuda

Ministry of Education

To the House of Assembly

By

The Hon. Diallo Rabain, JP, MP

Minister of Education

Ministerial Statement

Parish Primary School Consultation Decision

Date: Friday, July 23rd, 2021

Mr Speaker

This Government promised that we would finally be the government that took Education Reform seriously. If there is only one thing on which we all agree, it should be that our decisions around education must always consider what is best for our children today and for future generations. Over the last four years, we have set about bringing real and tangible education reform to provide an Education System that puts our children first and prepares them for 21st Century opportunities within an equitable and sustainable system. Our children must be educated to lead personally and professionally, compete locally, and contribute globally.

Mr Speaker

This morning I rise to share with my Honourable colleagues to share the decisions around the Parish Primary Schools Proposal. Last night, I announced that the Bermuda Public School System (BPSS) would move forward with Parish Primary Schools. This plan will see one primary school per parish with two primary schools in Pembroke for a total of 10 primary schools, eight less than the 18 primary schools we currently use.

Mr Speaker

If there has been one consistent cry from the people of Bermuda about Education, it has been said time and time again, that the decisions around Education need to be free of political influence and decisions should be more about what is best for our children. In fact, on Tuesday, I accepted a petition supporting the retention of a particular school by four gentlemen from Sandys. I was struck by one of their comments which implored me, and I quote, “Do not make the decision based on politics. Our children lose out when that is done.”

Mr Speaker

We used well thought out and defined criteria that identified the best existing school site in each parish that could be redeveloped or rebuilt into the Primary School of the future. One that would provide the required facility to complement the current work being done to redesign how teachers teach and how children learn, the revising of the curriculum and creating an equitable system and to achieve the vision of primary schools that exist of and for the parish and the community.

Mr Speaker

We have been hard at work since January 2020, preparing the proposal for Parish Primary Schools and thinking deeply about how to best engage the public in a robust and meaningful consultation on the proposal. Starting from the Consultation Document released in December 2020, followed by 24 zoom meetings with internal and external stakeholders, we spent a lot of time engaging with and listening to the public and their thoughts about the Parish Primary School proposal. The engagement sessions starting in January 2021 have led us to today, July 2021 and the decisions that were announced last night.

Mr Speaker

The engagement sessions garnered 131 written submissions, 434 individual questions and over 1,000 signatories. After the originally scheduled engagement sessions, further sessions were conducted with representatives of St. George’s and the Sandys communities. As a result, there was a change in the proposal for Devonshire Parish, based on alternatives provided from the consultation sessions.

This level of engagement is a testament to the importance of the decision, not just for Bermuda's children today, but for honouring the past and, importantly, for our future generations.

Mr Speaker

The decision to have Parish Primary Schools was solely based on the best possible sites currently being used within each Parish. This was a process that was fair, equitable, transparent, and robust. As a result of this process, the following sites are being redeveloped as Parish Primary Schools:

- St. George's – the East End Primary School Site
- Hamilton Parish - Francis Patton Primary School Site
- Smith's Parish – the Harrington Sound Primary School Site
- Devonshire Parish – the Elliot Primary School Site
- Pembroke Parish – the Victor Scott Primary School Site
- Pembroke Parish – the West Pembroke Primary School Site
- Paget Parish – the Paget Primary School Site
- Warwick Parish – the Purvis Primary School Site
- Southampton Parish – the Dalton E. Tucker School Site
- Sandys Parish – the Somerset Primary School Site

In addition to the above, The Prospect Primary School Site will be repurposed as an exceptionalities signature school. As a result, **Mr Speaker**, schools not named above will eventually be discontinued to be used as Primary Schools.

Mr Speaker

To be clear, I want to assure parents, educators and alumni that decisions on Parish Primary Schools will not have an immediate effect. There will be no closures of any primary schools this school year or next school year. These eventually discontinuing use of any schools will be phased in over a period of no less than five years, starting after the 2022/23 school year and more specifically between 2023 and 2027. In a few months, a project and programme management firm will be secured, and a supporting team created to develop a specific plan with timelines for transitioning away from the primary schools that will no longer be used. This will be anchored by a capital works project and finance plan. These

eventual changes will be challenging for many. We are acutely aware of the need to handle student and staff transitions throughout this process with care. We will engage and involve those directly affected and will share regular progress updates and implementation plans throughout the process.

Mr Speaker

Decisions like these are not taken lightly and without considerable thought behind them. As previously mentioned, we had a robust and meaningful consultation process in which the public was afforded the opportunity to express their opinions and provide alternatives to the proposals. I am fully aware that today's decisions, while being welcomed by some in our communities, will displease others. I can state with confidence that throughout the consultation, the majority of those engaged agreed and endorsed the direction Education Reform was headed, but not all agreed with the proposed school sites. Again, **Mr Speaker**, I reiterate that we must always make decisions around school reform with our children's best interests in mind. This must and should always be our guiding principle.

Mr Speaker,

This process has been very hard for some communities, that is, the parishes with multiple schools, while for others it has not, the parishes with one primary school. However, from St. George's to Sandys, we are asking our entire country to put the needs of our children first. Some communities will see neighbourhood schools that have stood for generations, eventually discontinued to be used, and that pain is not lost on me.

Mr Speaker

I have been open and transparent to everyone who has called, WhatsApped, emailed or spoken to me face to face that our decisions have to be based on what is best for our children and free from political pressures. I realise having this approach has not been received with open arms in our community. There is no secret that there have been some in the Sandys community that have been quite vocal in their opposition to the proposal that had the current Somerset Primary/Lagoon Pre-School site as the best site in Sandys to be redeveloped.

Mr Speaker

By way of some explanation, the West End Primary School has a very powerful 152-year history, and I am ever grateful for the numerous documents I have received detailing that rich and powerful history. A history that unfortunately is rooted in racial discrimination that has seen one school favoured over another in the past based on reasons of race. While this is a critical legacy that must be recognised, as I have mentioned on many occasions, our process focused on the sites of our current schools and which is best suited for redevelopment for our children. I have and I am sure my fellow MPs have already been inundated with messages from members of the public once the announcement that the decision would be made public on Thursday evening went live.

Mr Speaker,

The Bermuda Progressive Labour Party was born out of the auspices of fighting the intolerable legacy of discrimination to ensure all Bermudians are treated fairly and equal, as well as given the opportunities to succeed, regardless of the colour of their skin. Despite many of us in the Progressive Labour Party sharing and being subject to the same history and legacy, we have decided that this decision must be de-politicised. This does not mean dismissing the past; it is about privileging Bermuda's children's future. I draw colleagues' attention to the **Law of Origin** that states that "A school must be student-centred". This is a simple yet all-encompassing fact inherent in the reason for the creation and existence of schools and, therefore, inherent in the school's work. We must always follow that one guiding principle when it comes to Education Reform, which is always to do what is best for our children.

Mr Speaker

Throughout our consultation process, I personally have been moved by the level of passion and reverence our communities have shown for the schools within their parish. In Sandys especially, I have been reminded of the disgusting history of racism and segregation forced on our people that has led to unhealed trauma and pain that exists today. It is a shameful past that still lives within a certain segment of that community. However, as unsightly as it is, it is a rich history that we must honour in a meaningful way. On the other hand, there is a segment of

the same community that is fully behind the proposal as they see this as a means to finally achieve the equitable and fair system our forefathers fought for. These are real feelings felt by all and are not lost on me as the Minister of Education. I fully understand the resulting huge burden of making a decision that places our children's best possible chance to succeed before political pressures.

Mr Speaker

We have to, we must, and we will honour the legacy, history and culture of our schools, specifically our schools that provided our black children with opportunities when the system of the day refused to do so. To this end, we will recognise and celebrate our history and create a Historical Legacy Committee. The idea of this Committee is to determine the best way to document, record and share this rich history. Not only to preserve it for future generations but to help communities understand and cope with the intergenerational trauma and pain that still exists today within our community as a result. Work towards the Historical Legacy Commission has already begun and further updates will be provided in due course.

Mr Speaker

The first step is to create a national framework within which ideas and proposals from members of our community can be developed, implemented, and shared with schools and the community. Some examples, as suggested from the consultation process, may include:

- Digitised oral histories
- Published written histories of primary schools
- Visual historical timelines
- Homecoming celebrations
- Permanent historical exhibits in parish primary schools
- The potential renaming of some parish primary schools, and
- The rewriting of curriculum to include school and educational history.

I have heard and deeply understand the prospect of discontinuing the use of some schools, including those with rich histories and legacies. This is a very

difficult and painful prospect for many community elders, alumni, parents and students, and I acknowledge that.

Mr Speaker

I am, however, heartened by the consistent thread throughout all the information provided on the importance of history and legacy. It comes back to the guiding principle that all children should have an equitable, high-quality and world-class education. History teaches us many lessons, and that we need to do better for each and every one of our children is one that we have learned as a result of this process and one we are working to realise. Today we stand at the cusp of a life-altering decision for our children. A decision that will chart the next chapter in the history of public education in Bermuda for generations to come.

Mr Speaker

We are not simply deciding to discontinue using schools because it is something to do. We are opening new schools on sites that have been judged to be the best possible sites per parish. While we refer to these sites by the names of the schools that currently occupy that space, there is no reason why renaming schools to reflect the progress and growth we as a country has made over the last 50+ years should not be considered. In fact, in some cases, this should be considered mandatory. Our history in Bermuda, especially Education, has been filled with examples of deliberate and purposeful exclusion of certain segments of society, mostly black children, to our country's detriment. We will start the process of writing a new chapter and creating new memories for our children and future generations to look back upon fondly. A future in which any child, regardless of who they are, are able to best succeed. Time will heal all wounds, but only if we allow them to be healed.

Mr Speaker

In the Year 2021, in a nation as proud as ours, an Island as small as ours, with so many assets in human capital, with the political will of the Government, and holding our aspirations for young people close to our hearts – I ask, ***why shouldn't each and every child in Bermuda receive a world-class education?*** When it comes to education, leadership is not about the next election; it is about the next generation. It is time for all of us to walk the walk and not just talk the talk about Education Reform. **Thank You, Mr Speaker**