

Education Reform & Government Secrecy

by Ralph J Massey

The article by John Marquis in the Tribune “It’s time to reject culture of secrecy” certainly struck a familiar chord for those laboring in the vineyard of education reform.

The subject warrants public attention; and there are various ways of thinking about education. For Tom Garvin, an Irish political scientist, education is a means by which society invests in the next generation. He looked at it in connection with the emergence of Ireland as the economic Celtic Tiger of the European Union in the late 1990s. He asked the questions “Why was Ireland so poor for so long?” and “Why and how did it move from a very poor, static, claustrophobic society to a dynamic prosperous free market society...seemingly all within a ten-year period?” For him the Irish investment in human capital after 1965 was the point of departure.

The Initiative.

In the first quarter of 2005 a group of Bahamian executives concluded that the state of education in the Bahamas was “unacceptable.” Major investment projects were approved by Government that included inducements to invest and commitments to hire Bahamians. The problem is that there are not a sufficient number of qualified Bahamians to meet those employment targets.

Companies can easily document their experiences. The problem is not just the absence of specific “vocational skills” or job experience; it is also basic literacy... the inability to read, write, speak and calculate well.

This led to the formation of the Coalition for Education Reform, a group of business and labour organizations centered in tourism, and the publication of “Bahamian Youth: The Untapped Resource” that was based on the 2004 academic test results. It was submitted to the Ministry of Education in May 2005 in response to its “National Call for Papers” for the 18th National Education Conference. The Coalition released it to the media in December; and it was the front page lead story for two days in the press. It was the basis for a TV documentary shown on Cable TV in January 2006.

The Learning Crisis.

The Math exam is written in the greatest numbers, almost one-fifth of the total exams taken. The average mean grade in 2005 was an E, unchanged from 2004. No subject describes the crisis in education more than math.

What is particularly troublesome is that mathematics is an important basic education skill for the technologies that are likely to dominate the rest of this century. One cannot take the poor math scores lightly, especially when one knows that the average grade on the bookkeeping exam was also an E.

But...the most startling outcome is the difference in the test scores between Mathematics and Religious Studies.

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	U	Total
Mathematics	2%	3%	20%	15%	17%	15%	15%	14%	100%
Religious Studies	17%	29%	22%	20%	8%	2%	1%	0%	100%

The table shows the distribution of grades as a percent of the total exams taken for each exam for each of the eight grade-designators “A” through “U” used in the Bahamas.

The average math score was an E and the peak grade was “C”. However, most got lower scores shown to the right of the peak. The grades were skewed to the right.

In sharp contrast the Religious Studies scores have a peak score of “B” (29% of total) and an average of “C”. The grades were skewed to the left.

This contrast in academic performance is even more pronounced if one uses the five grade-designator system employed in the United States and elsewhere.

	A	B	C	D	F	Total	
Mathematics	2%	3%	20%	15%	60%	100%	In Mathematics 2% of the 4,400 students taking the exam got “As” and 60% got “Fs”, the combination of the “Es” through “Us”.
Religious Studies	17%	29%	22%	20%	11%	100%	

In Religious Studies 17% of the 1,700 students taking the exam got “As” and 11% got “Fs”.

To a cynic, this data alone suggests that the objective of education is the promotion of religion and not the creation of skills needed in a modern economy. This imbalance in academic outcomes raises obvious questions:

“How are teachers selected now and in the past?”

“What level of math proficiency is required now and in the past?”

“How much class room time is allocated to teaching math versus religion?”

Answers to these questions would appear as a necessary first step in developing an education reform program.

The response.

Evidently the initiative of the Coalition for Education Reform is stalled. Apparently the Minister of Education has avoided meeting with the Coalition and the Ministry of Education has blocked further requests for BGCSE test data.

But secrecy over the BGCSE test results has been a Government policy for a long time.

The Education Act requires the Minister of Education to report annually to Parliament on the state of education. The last such report was made in 1995. It contained limited BGCSE data in the Exhibits; but it did not state, and one could not calculate, the overall mean grade. Nor was there a meaningful discussion of academic achievement. In fact, there was only one sentence in the 19-page document and that simply conceded that there was a problem.

The mutual benefit society.

The reasons for this neglect may be the Culture of Secrecy. However, I believe that a more robust explanation is that there is “a mutual benefit society” of the powerful. There is a web of politicians, connections, monopolies in business, monopolies in labour, public enterprises, government bureaucracies and the clergy. Each benefits from the status quo to such a degree that any threat of change postpones change...the next election is always too close...politics prevails.

It can be validly argued that this situation will only change when the education system produces a better prepared, more confident middle class that forces politicians to look beyond the next election...like addressing long-term problems...like investing today in the country’s human capital, its students. The problem is “How does the Bahamas break the present stalemate?”

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