

# Bahamian Youth: The Untapped Resource

**Presenter: J Barrie Farrington,  
The Coalition for Education Reform**

**The Research Edge Forum, The College of the Bahamas**

**March 16, 2007**

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## **The Meeting**

Mr. Barrie Farrington, Senior Vice President, Kerzner International, and President of the Bahamas Hotel Employers Association, discussed the twin business and education crises facing the Bahamas and some of the steps that must be taken to resolve them.

The Coalition for Education Reform was created in 2004 by a group of Bahamian leaders and organizations concerned over the insufficient number of qualified Bahamian job candidates. Certain members had expansion plans and a real need to hire Bahamians. But too many Bahamian job applicants lacked functional literacy -- the basic ability to read, write, speak and calculate. This limits their ability to qualify for jobs that require basic skills on day-one or for jobs where skills may be acquired with on-the-job training after being hired.

He gave anecdotal evidence. But his main evidence was the BGCSE (Bahamas General Certificate of Secondary Education) exams that are designed to show what students “know, understand and can do” on leaving school.

That data are reported on the BGCSE 8-point scale; and the results for all exams were shown in a graph. However, to more clearly show the education crisis, the data was put on a 5-point scale (“A”, “B”, “C”, “D” and “F”). The last four points of the 8-point scale (“E”, “F”, “G” and “U”) were shown as an “F”. The 5-point system is the one used in the United States, Canada and elsewhere.

**This produced a graphic picture of academic performance that was shocking:**

- **In the English Language exam 33% of the students earned an “F”.**
- **In the Math exam 59% earned an “F”.**
- **Males wrote 38% of all exams taken and females 62%.**
- **Females earned almost twice as many “As” and “Bs” as males.**
- **52 % of the Public High School students and 22% of the Private High School students earned “Fs”.**

Mr. Farrington went on to discuss the causes. He talked about the strategic errors made in the 1970s. This was the period when the system was expanded to provide universally available primary and secondary education. The strategic errors were clearly identified;

but the broader “social ills” underlying the poor academic performance were far more complex. This led to a vigorous discussion of “causes” by the audience.

The Coalition’s original Report dated July 2005, its documentary of January 2006 and this presentation all focused on what specifically could be done. Mr. Farrington discussed “Parenting” and the problems presented by the single parent, female headed family.

He then went on to “Teaching” and here he proposed a very specific first step designed to re-engage the male student, the All Male Primary and Secondary Laboratory School. Such a school would create an environment conducive to learning.

This proposal is based on successful schools that cater to the needs of disadvantaged students in low-income areas in the United States. These are “college-preparatory schools where educationally underserved students develop the knowledge, skills and character needed to succeed in top quality high schools, colleges and the competitive world beyond.”

The success of such schools requires a “private enterprise” styled management and organizational framework. Such a school nestled within the Department of Education presents “a serious organizational and managerial challenge”.

The proposal is radical and audacious. To be successful “the educational bureaucracy, the union and Parliament must be convinced that their long-term self-interest can be best served by their support of this great experiment; they must take the necessary steps to make it happen.”

Mr. Farrington reaffirmed the commitment of the Coalition to education reform. One needs only to read the membership list to know the importance of its members to the economic life and prosperity of the country.

**The Coalition for Education Reform**  
**March 26, 2007**

## The PowerPoint Presentation

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### Slide #1

# **BAHAMIAN Youth**

**J Barrie Farrington**

**Coalition for Education Reform**

**March 16, 2007**

**I**n 2004 a group of Bahamians discussed their common problems and agreed that the Bahamian education system was not producing enough school leavers able to engage in business. This is a challenge to any businessman who wants to invest and grow. The demand for qualified Bahamian job candidates simply exceeds the supply.

- One Bahamian executive finds that job candidates who cannot write a simple paragraph with clear sentences, and
- Another finds applicants who cannot solve the markup and discount problems contained in their company's aptitude test.

These are not specific "vocational skills" but rather "basic literacy", the ability to read, write, speak and calculate.

This realization led to the formation of the Coalition for Education Reform, a group of business and labour organizations that includes the --

1. Bahamas Chamber of Commerce,
2. Bahamas Employers Confederation,
3. National Congress of Trade Unions,
4. Bahamas Hotel Association
5. Bahamas Hotel Catering & Allied Workers Union
6. Bahamas Hotel Employers Association
7. Nassau Tourism Development Board

This effort resulted in the publication of "Bahamian Youth: The Untapped Resource" that was submitted to the Department of Education in June 2005.

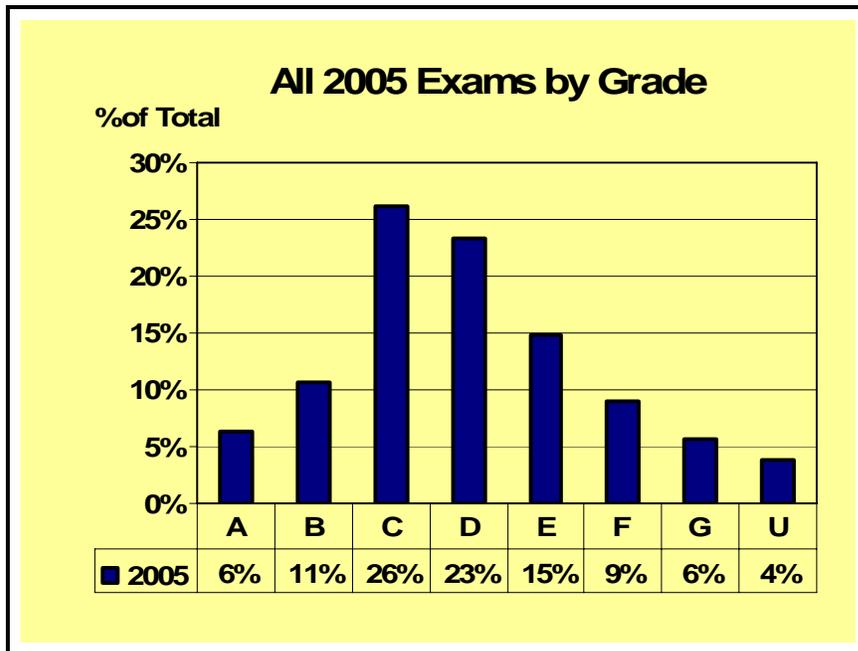
As indicated in the ABSTRACT for this Research Edge forum, you can access it on the Bahamas Chamber of Commerce website.

This Report was also the basis for a documentary that was shown on Cable television in January 2006.

This effort would not have been possible without the willingness of many members of the Department of Education to share their experiences and insights.

Today I will present an updated version of our Report and Documentary. In this I will concentrate on two skills...English and math...that define the problem and two strategies.

## Slide #2



**T**his graph shows the 2005 mean scores for the BGCSE exams written by both private and public high school students. This academic performance has gotten a great deal of press coverage and was the subject of a recent presentation to this forum.

The graph shows --

- The eight grade designations, “A” through “U”, on the horizontal axis, and
- The grades on the vertical axis as percentages of the total exams written. The data box also shows the percentage distribution.

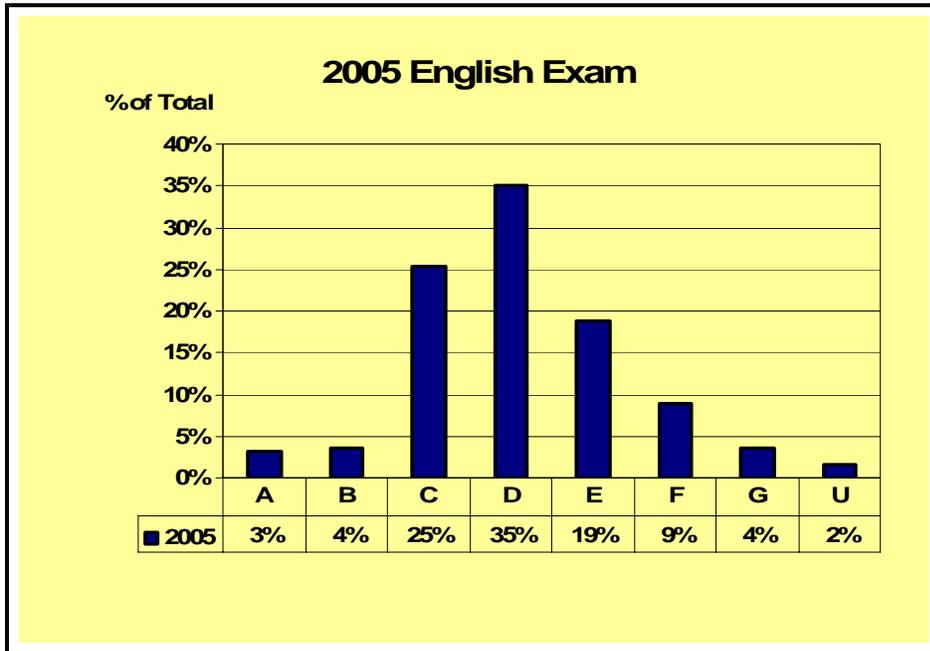
In 2005 the 22,380 exams written earned a Mean Grade of D+ up from the D in 2004.

While this “year-over-year” improvement warrants praise, it cannot yet be considered the beginning of a trend. Between 1993 and 1998 the BGCSE mean grade moved up and down in the D minus to D range, and since 1999 within a D minus-D plus range.

While there was improvement in 2005, it is too early to say that there has been a fundamental improvement in what the average student knows, understands and can do after completing high school.

In the following slides I will concentrate on the English Language and Mathematics exams.

### Slide #3



This graph shows the results of the 2005 English Language exam; 4,781 students from the private and public schools earned a “D”, a half-grade improvement over 2004.

This distribution of grades looks normal insofar as there is a peak grade “D” with 35 percent of the scores and the balance is distributed to the left and to the right of that peak.

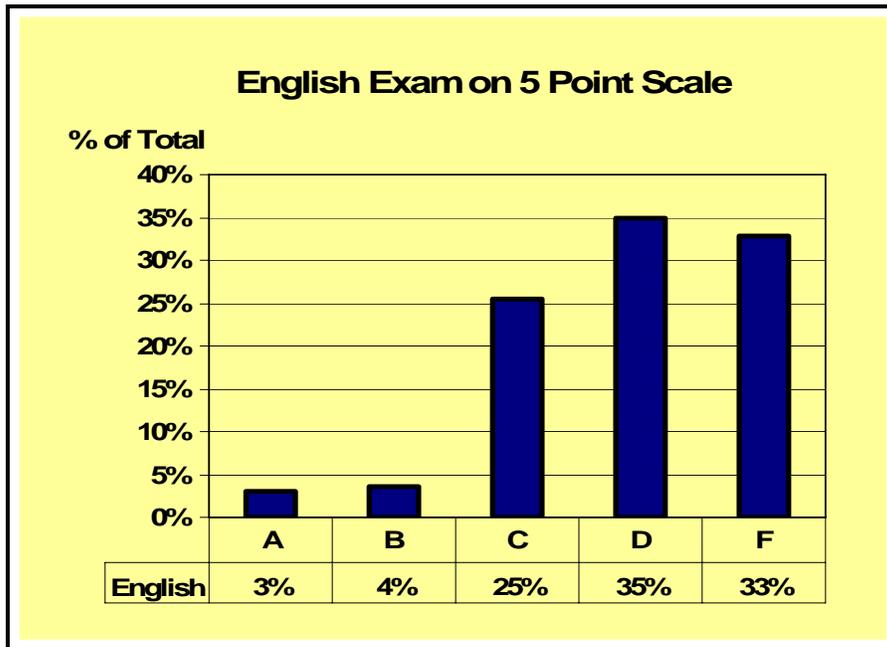
The Testing and Evaluation Section sets specific standards for each grade designator and the whole system is based on the Cambridge Syndicate of the U.K.

The “Good News” is that the “F, G and U” group decreased from 20.2% of the total in 2004 to 14.1% of the total in 2005. The half-grade improvement in the English Language score was the biggest contributor to the half-grade improvement in the 2005 “All Exams” performance that I just noted.

However, one can contend that this graph obscures the “Bad News”. This can be seen more clearly if the eight grade designator system of “A” through “U” is converted to the five point system of “A” through “F” that is used in the United States, Canada and elsewhere.

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## Slide #4



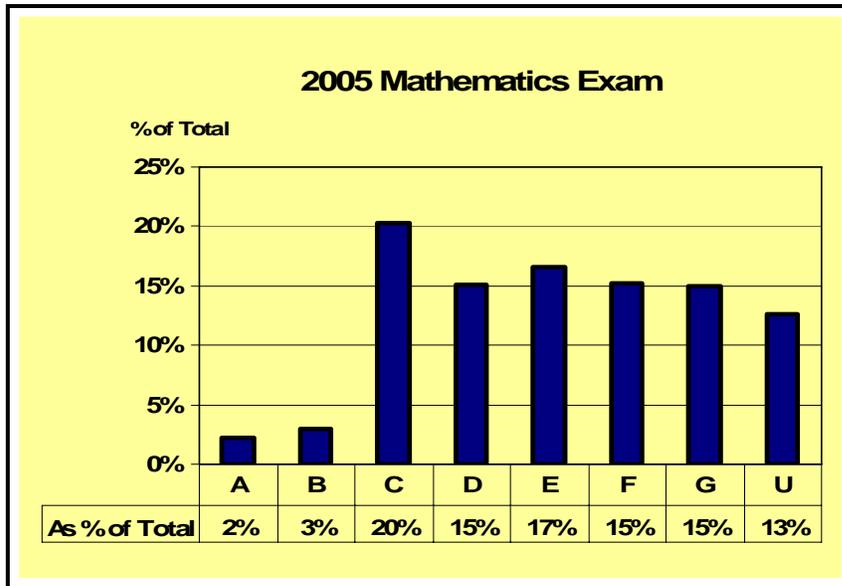
**T**his graphic picture of academic achievement in English differs from the previous one because the grades “E”, “F”, “G” and “U” have been added together and shown as a single designator “F” under the 5 point system.

As you can see in the data box, “Ds” and “Fs” combined are 68 percent of the total...a result not at all comforting to informed Bahamians.

You must understand that the business community prefers to hire Bahamians. It is simpler, generally less costly and it is the law. But the problem occurs when job candidates score poorly on the standard aptitude tests given during the initial job interviews.

The shortage of qualified Bahamians with a command of the English language is critical to tourism because the skills of its employees dealing with its clients directly affects the latter’s view of the Bahamas. The negative feed-back from visitors to the Bahamas fuels the passion and commitment of the industry to support education reform.

## Slide #5



**T**he Math exam is one that is written in the greatest numbers by private and public school leavers...almost one-fifth of the total. The average mean grade in 2005 was an “E”, unchanged from 2004. No subject describes the crisis in education more graphically than the test results in mathematics.

For instance, the 2006 syllabus for mathematics specifies that -

- A Grade “A” student is able, for instance, to “manipulate algebraic equations – linear, simultaneous and quadratic”.<sup>1</sup>
- Grade “U” has no formal descriptor in the syllabus but is described as a lack of a substantive knowledge. It is acknowledged that this includes “Not knowing the difference between addition and multiplication”.

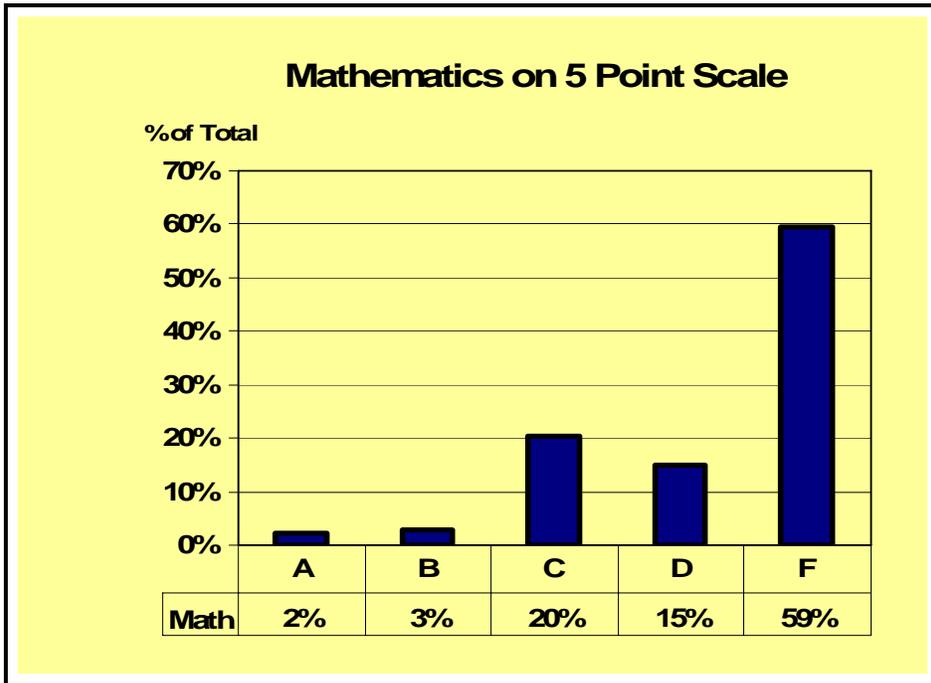
This is particularly troublesome because mathematics is so important for the technologies that are likely to dominate this century. Bill Gates of Microsoft, when addressing the importance of basic math, said

“I have never met a guy who has created software and who doesn’t know how to multiply.”<sup>2</sup>

One cannot take the poor math scores lightly, especially when one knows that --

- The average grade on the bookkeeping exam was also an E, and
- Some level of math proficiency is essential to mastering a wide range of lower tech skills that are in short supply in the Bahamas.

## Slide #6

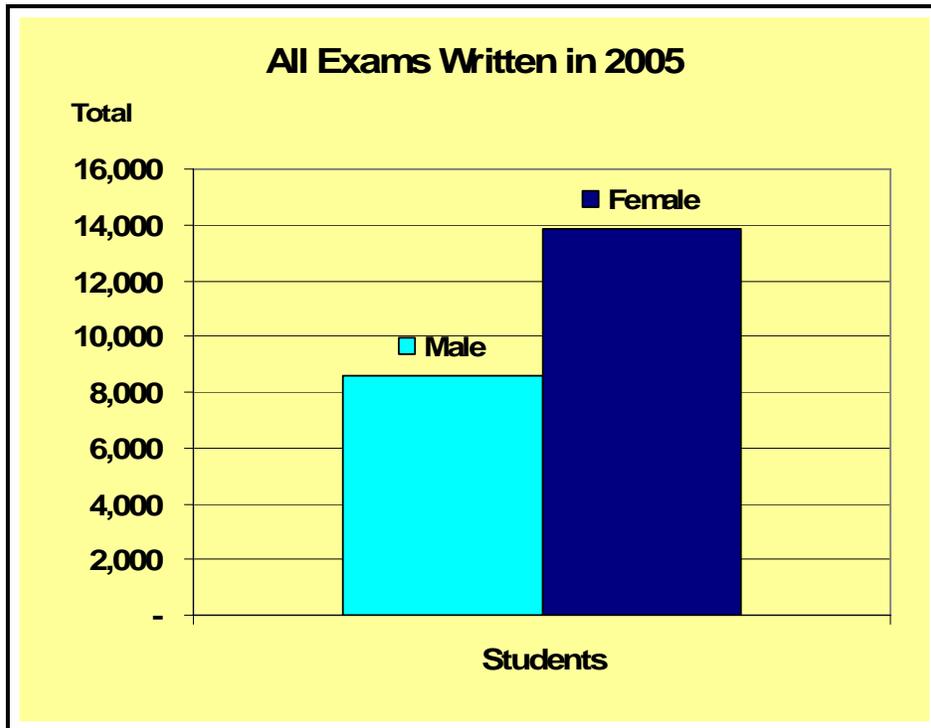


If we show the math results on a five point scale, as we did with English, the picture becomes even more alarming. The grades “E”, “F”, “G” and “U” are combined and shown as an “F”. Fifty-nine percent of the students earn an “F”.

Clearly math proficiency is so critical that it warrants a definitive analysis and an effective remedial program.

Ladies and Gentlemen – Nothing suggests the magnitude of the country’s education problem as clearly as this picture of math proficiency.

## Slide # 7

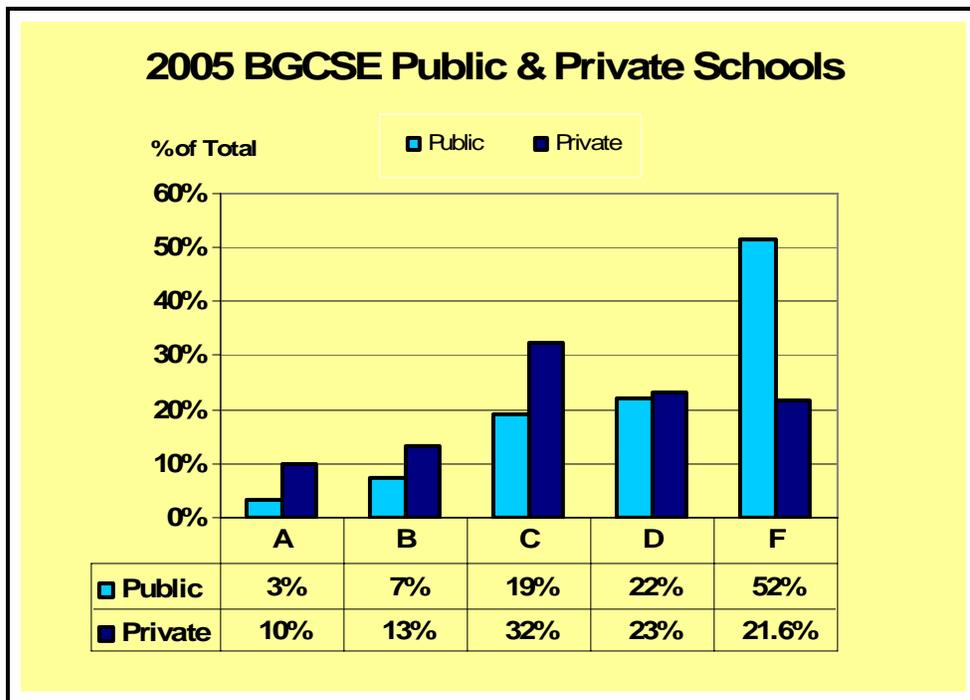


**A** very important dimension of the problem is gender. Although male and female students in grade one are virtually equal in numbers, the proportion taking the BGCSE tests is significantly different. Of the 22,422 students taking the exam, 8,570 were male (38% of the total) and 13,852 were female (62% of the total).

This implies a male drop-out ratio of 35.4%.

Furthermore, the combination of lower numbers taking the exam plus lower scores means that the number of females earning “As” and “Bs” was almost twice the number of males earning “As” and “Bs”.

## Slide # 8



**A**nother dimension of the problem is the relative academic performance of the public and private schools. As can be seen in the graph, 52% of the public school students taking the exam earn “Fs” versus 22% of the private school students.

In addressing this issue as it appeared in the 2004 data, the BGCSE Report stated –

“Were it not for the Private schools and a few Public High schools in the Family Islands, the mean Grade for the country would have been an astounding E [rather than a D]... This is totally unacceptable”<sup>3</sup>

## Slide # 9

### Politics and Strategic Errors

- Politics
- End of elitism
- Social promotion
- Bahamianization

**T**his conclusion prompts one to ask the question “Why?”

The Coalition in a chapter titled “Lessons” commented as follows:

**Politics.** A political objective of Majority Rule was the expansion of both primary and secondary education so that education would be universally available. Back then...one could have reasonably expected that universal education would produce both -

1. A set of commonly accepted core values that would enhance social stability, and
2. A level of individual knowledge and skills that would promote growth and prosperity.

Ironically the country was successful in expanding the number of schools, teachers and students. It physically achieved its quantitative objective. But...it failed to achieve the reasonable qualitative objectives. One can conclude that political objectives dominated the decision making.

**End of Elitism.** In 1976 the Government closed “old” Government High, a school designed to train future leaders. Its graduates were the core of the new government that included such notables as Lynden O. Pindling, Paul Adderley, A. D. Hanna, Timothy Donaldson, Vincent Vanderpool-Wallace and Hugh Sands.

There were competitive exams for entry; the courses were more demanding. The students were predominantly black; and the Board of Governors was separate from the Department of Education.

The Government dismissed the Board and folded the school into the system. Its announced objective was an egalitarian one, treat all students equally.

The result was to eliminate the only locus of academic excellence and high standards in the public school system.

**Social Promotion.** Social Promotion is the practice of allowing students who have failed to meet performance standards to pass on to the next grade instead of satisfying the requirements of the grade. As a result students can flow through the system with a minimum effort if they simply meet the legal requirement of attendance and avoid committing a felony. This destroys discipline, promotes chaos in the class room and cripples the learning process. Ending or modifying this practice now is truly a gigantic problem.

**Bahamianization.** There were two forces at work after Majority Rule that profoundly affected teaching quality: the rapid expansion of the system to achieve universally available education and **Bahamianization**, the displacement of foreign teachers by Bahamians. Meeting the hiring targets flowing from these twin decisions produced a decline in teacher standards.

The historian, Michael Craton, states that “the number of teaching candidates multiplied six fold in a decade” while “the proportion of entrants with the original requirement of five “O” level passes fell from 90 to less than 10 percent”.<sup>4</sup>

A World Bank study “Caribbean Development in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” called Barbados the “Star of the Caribbean”, the only English speaking country that avoided a decline in education quality in the post-Colonial period.

And politics continues to play a critical role in education. A more recent example is the Education Act that requires the Minister of Education to make an annual report to Parliament on “the work of his Ministry and the state of education generally.”

The last such report was in 1995 and it, with one exception, did not discuss what school leavers knew, understood and could do after completing high school. The exception was one sentence stating that --

“More research is needed in the development of a scheme to assist those who exhibit a lack of knowledge of the relevant subject matter.”

That’s glossing over reality. That’s denial. That’s politics.

## Slide # 10

# Social Ills

**S**ome may argue that the Coalition's analysis was superficial. Yes, experts, journalists and commentators may differ on the facts cited and remedies proposed. This is inevitable when we are talking about a society.

Recently "The Situation of Youth in the Bahamas", a study commissioned by the Ministry of Youth and Culture, apparently went far beyond the Coalition's report. The study, as reported in the media by Nicki Kelly, described the social problems of today's youth in great detail...hyperactive sexual activity, substance abuse, etc.

The Coalition's Report stressed the proportionately large number of out-of-wedlock children and the single parent female-headed family unit that became the principal family structure during the 1970s. The Coalition labeled it as the most disabling factor affecting academic achievement.

The Alternative Educational Program, project SURE... "Success Ultimately Reassures Everyone"... is dedicated to the recovery of male students with chronic disciplinary problems. The Program has been unable to involve male parents or guardians in its critical counseling sessions. At this time in their lives these young men are "fatherless".

The Superintendent of Prisons stated that there is a demonstrated relationship between the ability to read and write and a person's self-esteem. This, in turn, has an effect on a person's behaviour and the likelihood they will commit a crime.

These strategic errors and the social ills are long on description and short on adequate explanations of "Why?"

Nevertheless, the bottom line is –

"We have a crisis in education. What do we do?"

## Slide # 11

# Parenting

Looking at what students know on leaving school, strategic errors and social ills can be depressing.

However, the Coalition prefers to be optimistic. It sees opportunity. Here is a resource like sand, sea and sky that can be tapped for the benefit of all. But producing change and tapping that resource takes courage and determination.

A good example of what can be done is better parenting. There are concrete steps that can be taken.

- The courts can enforce child support payments. This can produce increased income for single mothers and send a strong message to males...“If you father a child, then you must assume an 18-year financial commitment”.
- Schools can extend the school day to provide more actual time for teaching, extracurricular activities or apprenticeship programs.
- The summer remedial learning program can be made mandatory and a failure to pass means the student must repeat the grade.

None of this is easy. Success requires courage and determination.

The ultimate goal is that moment when --

**All community leaders accept and promote a set of commonly held expectations that promote good parenting...a Bahamian Good Parenting Script.**

## The All Male Primary and Secondary Laboratory School

**T**he disengagement of the Bahamian male from school is a major threat to our society. One place to start is an **All Male Primary and Secondary Laboratory School** that operates as an independent school nestled within the public school system.

Fortunately, there are many examples of primary and secondary schools that have forged successful programs targeting disadvantaged students. The Coalition Report used the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) with its 38 schools as an example; and it described that program in significant detail. And there are others like the Frederick Douglas Academy & High School in Harlem and the Amistad Academy in New Haven Connecticut. All of these schools are privately owned and largely privately funded.

According to Abigail Thernston the formula for their success is common sense; the aim is to shape the culture of the student. <sup>5</sup> The elements are –

- Greatly extended instruction time with more hours in the school day, week and year...in total, 62 percent more instruction time.
- Terrific principals “who have the authority and autonomy to manage their budgets, set salaries, staff the schools with fabulous teachers, and get rid of those who don’t work out.”
- A relentless focus “on the core academic subjects, insisting that students learn the times tables, basic historical facts, punctuation, the rules of grammar, and the meaning of often unfamiliar words.”
- Safe and orderly environments conducive to learning. Systematic disorder unfortunately is an almost natural tendency. These schools eliminate it.

These schools have been successful in producing students with higher levels of academic achievement and opportunities for college and university study.

The All Male Primary and Secondary Laboratory School is an alternative for the family with a son in the public school system that wants to provide that son with the opportunity for a superior education.

- It is an alternative for those willing and able to live by the rules of the school.

- It means competing for acceptance; failure means a return to the standard public school.
- It is a program to demonstrate how good public education can be and is not intended to achieve political or egalitarian ends.

An All Male Primary and Secondary Laboratory School presents the Department of Education with a serious organizational and managerial challenge...how to provide the structure that will allow the proposed school to have the “elements for success”.

The proposal of a truly independent educational enterprise owned by the Bahamian Government is a radical and audacious action necessitated by a true crisis. The Coalition firmly believes that the country must take this step.

There is a large “Education” bureaucracy, a strong union and laws that governed employment. The bureaucracy, union and parliament must be convinced that their long-term self-interest can be best served by their support of this great experiment; and they must take the necessary steps to make it happen. We believe this is possible.

## Slide # 13

# Implications

The All Male Primary and Secondary Laboratory School is more likely to succeed if revolutionary changes are also made in the Department of Education itself. The Minister of Education recently alluded to the need for better “governance.”

The Department must --

- Be allowed to focus on producing a better end product and be judged on that basis
- Be allowed to do its job free from political interference
- Adopt the successful and flexible management principles and techniques often associated with the private sector, and
- Abandon those that are more typically associated with government bureaucracies.
- Practice the virtues of accountability and transparency.

It is difficult to list the explicit immediate and intermediate steps that Government must take to realize these objectives. That is the task at hand if effective and efficient reform is to occur.

These are the views of the Coalition for Education Reform. Our target should be –

“Bahamian students will be the ‘Best in the Caribbean’ by 2020.”

March 15, 2007

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<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Education, **BGCSE Mathematics Syllabus 2006**, pages 8-10.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas L. Friedman, **The World is Flat**, page 264

<sup>3</sup> Confidential Reports, **Bahamas General Certificate of Secondary Education - 2004**, Ministry of Education, Testing and Evaluation Section, 31 pages.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Craton, **A History of the Bahamas**, 3<sup>rd</sup>. Edition, San Salvador Press, 1986, page 281.

<sup>5</sup> Abigail Thernstrom, “A Culture of Choice”, **Liberty and Learning**, The Cato Institute, 2006, page 43.