



COMMUNICATION

BY

THE HONOURABLE JEFFREY L. LLOYD

IN THE HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

WEDNESDAY, JULY 22ND, 2020.

MR. SPEAKER:

As the world grapples with trepidation and uncertainty of the impact of COVID-19, The Ministry and Department of Education continues the daunting task of education our children amid the horror of this global pandemic.

On March 17, this year, when school buildings across the country were closed, the Ministry of Education expanded its already functioning virtual

network platform, and transitioned into 100 percent online education and instruction.

At the start of this Communication, Sir, may I repeat what has already been announced by the Ministry of Education.

EXAMS:

Firstly, Due to the spike in COVID-19 cases locally, and the recent lockdown of the island of Grand Bahama, The Ministry of Education, in an effort to ensure the safety and well-being of all concerned, and to protect the integrity of the national exams, has suspended the 2020 sitting of the Bahamas Junior Certificate (BJC) and Bahamas General Certificate of Secondary Education (BGCSE) examinations, effective immediately. Please note, Sir, this is a suspension, **NOT A CANCELLATION**

It is imperative, therefore, that ALL Examination Candidates, continue their preparation for the exams. Parents, Students and All Others are advised that this suspension is not a pass to relax efforts toward exam preparation. These crucial examinations, which serves as substantial credentials for students, will be administered as soon as clearance is given by the Competent Authority.

Secondly, Public Schools will re-open on September 21st, 2020, at the usual time. As plans are centered around that date, the Ministry will continue to monitor the developments of COVID-19 and will adjust accordingly. In our strategic efforts toward the reopening of schools for the 2020/2021 school year, it is quite evident that one size does not fit all. Cognizant of this fact, the Department of Education, after following carefully the latest developments on the health front, and

OPERATING PARADIGM

Mr. Speaker, over the past few months, The Ministry and Department of Education, after rigorous consultation with international and local education stakeholders and public health officials, have conceived and designed the best strategies for the reopening of schools. It is important the state here, Sir, that in all our considerations, we are and will continue to be Guided by the advice from public health officials and education stakeholders, and what is in the best interests of our Staff and students. The health and safety of Everyone associated with education is paramount. In this present environment, The priority is to minimize the risk of direct infection of COVID-19 as teaching and learning continue, regardless of the path we choose.

Three instructional models have emerged from our intensive deliberations, namely: **Face to Face, Hybrid/Blended Learning, and Online Learning.**

There will be at all times, even concurrently, a blend of these models.

Let me be clear, Sir: The Bahamas is an archipelago – with schools in many different environments. Therefore, **one size does not fit all.** What works best in one scenario may not be best for another.

The ideal arrangement for our children is the **FACE-TO-FACE MODEL.**

Especially those in the pre-primary, the primary and even middle years, This Face-to-Face Model guarantees their most effective social, emotional, intellectual, physical, cultural and spiritual development. It is the least disruptive to the established routine of our students, parents and our instructional leaders. It is easier to monitor and evaluate the instructional process and it provides the comfort of normalcy.

It is possible, for instance, that the Euthal Rodgers Primary School in Deep Creek, South Andros, with an enrollment of less than 100 students, would be able to engage in a face to face daily model of learning throughout the day, week and year.

In some schools, Face-to-Face will work. In others it will not. For instance, in schools with larger student population, and with the necessity of

observing all health protocols, face-to-face cannot work. We simply do not have the space to accommodate the total student body.

If the spread of this virus abates, we will be able to proceed with the entire student body attending the school campus every day, all day.

However, no matter what we do: the required health and safety standards will be rigidly observed and enforced.

There will be the wearing of masks in public for children, where appropriate, physical distancing, with a classroom capacity of 20 square feet per student, staggered lunch times, cancelation of general assemblies where crowds gather, temperature checks, the utilization of multiple entry and exit points on campuses and engaging additional busses to transport students to and from campuses.

We recognize that some of our Educators who have pre-existing co-morbidities and who may not be available for face to face instruction in the midst of COVID19 would have to continue to utilize our online platform to assist with delivering instruction. Additionally, we will have to redeploy some of our teachers according to their specialized skills in order to meet needs in certain specialized areas.

Mr. Speaker, that is the most ideal situation, but unless our Heavenly Father grants us a supernatural miracle, it is highly unlikely that we will be able to proceed with this model throughout most of our schools.

The ONLINE Model

Mr. Speaker, our second option is a fully Online Learning Model. In this model students remain away from the school's campus and the entire instruction takes place online, in the home or elsewhere under the supervision of their parents or other suitably qualified adults.

Parents have the right to choose any of the model we have outlined for their children. If they choose this model, it is essentially homeschooling that they have chosen, and will be required to register their child with the Homeschooling Unit of the Ministry of Education.

They can go online to the Ministry's webpage, or come or call the Ministry for information as to how they may go online and register.

I may remind Parents that the law states in Section 23 of the Education Act:

(1) It shall be the duty of the parents of every child of compulsory school age to cause him to receive full-time education suitable to

his age, ability and aptitude, by regular attendance at school or otherwise.”

The advantages to such a model are that there is minimal risk to the COVID19 virus along with a flexible learning environment which allows students to review the lesson at their pace. Additionally, the Ministry of Education already operates a virtual platform in place, expanding its capacity to include the entire student populace.

While, more students can be accommodated in a virtual classroom, We are aware that this is not the most ideal learning option for our pre-primary, lower primary or Special Education students.

We further recognize that between 9 a.m. – 3 p.m.; Monday – Friday, our schools provide safe spaces for many of our children. With online learning, that duty of care shifts to the home or others and must be well managed if learning is to be successfully carried out. We further recognize that some parents and guardians are not equipped to assist students as needed and some students are unable to self-regulate.

With this in mind we invite our community stakeholders, to consider providing flexible working hours for our parents and guardians, so they

would be in a better position to spend more time at home between 9 a.m. – 3 p.m.

THE HYBRID MODEL

The final Option is The Hybrid Model: which combines face to face instruction with online learning. A Hybrid Learning Model decreases the number of students on the campus each day by moving some of the instruction online to an alternate day schedule.

Those students who are online, may remain at home, or attend a Care Center on that day. The Care Center will be fully equipped, fully manned and supervised.

A schedule has been worked out where on any given day, no more than two thirds of the school population will be on Campus.

There will be face-to-face everyday, for some groups on students. All Groups will attend three days per week.

Mr. Speaker, there are strategies purposefully outlined for each day.

Hybrid learning lends itself to individualized learning, opportunities for learning on demand and a greater partnership between home and school.

Ongoing support will be provided for parents to assist their children in a hybrid learning environment.

The three days that students engage face to face are allotted for

- 1) delivery of content – Here the teacher presents new information or a concept to students.
- 2) Differentiated instruction – The teacher assigns tasks to students according to their needs.
- 3) Guided Practice – The teacher gives on hand direction to reinforce concepts taught.
- 4) Assessment – Students' are evaluated in person to ensure they truly master the content.

Further details of the schedule in this model will be made available to Parents and Students in the coming weeks.

The key here is that School starts on September 21st. The Ministry will make every effort to meet the needs of the student. However, everyone must get involved – Parents, Churches, the Society at large.

Mr. Speaker, as is the case with each of the models, there are always disadvantages. We are quite cognizant of the disadvantages of the Hybrid Model. Such as:

- There may be limited access to devices and connectivity for students;
- There may be less supervision or management while the students are away from the Campus, because Parents and students may be inexperienced with the virtual learning
- High cost of making provisions for and maintaining the resources required (personnel, technologies, material)

While these challenges exist, we have sought viable solutions for each. As we continue to reiterate, the Ministry constantly encourages private/public partnerships for technologies and connectivity.

We have begun the engagement of community partners, such as Churches, in securing spaces appropriate and approved spaces, properly equipped, properly managed, internet and wi-fi capable, to be used as Care Centers for students while away from school. Again, parents of students online may choose to keep them at home to transport them to a Care Center. Same hours

as the school day. A Care Center is in the same vicinity as the school, so there is little disruption in the travel for the Student. There, the student must bring his/her own device.

We are inviting our community partners, particularly our churches and civic groups, to consider using their meetings rooms to provide alternative safe learning spaces for the students in their community, during their time away from the traditional classroom.

As an alternative to working from home, some students may seek to access one of our public libraries. All of our libraries will be offering free Wi Fi services to our student body. While our public libraries will be available, we recognize that social distancing protocols will severely limit their capacity. We believe that community safe spaces could provide an additional place for our students to settle down in a managed environment, and engage the virtual learning platform.

Mr. Speaker, the medical professionals throughout the world have indicated that COVID-19 will most likely be a part of our reality for the foreseeable future. Accepting this reality, the Ministry of Education is strengthening its public / private partnerships to ensure our students have the necessary devices and Wi Fi connectivity to fully participate in an online mode of learning. Technology is obviously an integral part of 21st century classroom instruction.

Against this backdrop, The Ministry appeals to parents to become more active and involved partners in their children's education. The COVID-19 pandemic has turned our world upside down. Yet we press on. In preparation for the upcoming school year, the Ministry is urging every parent of students within the public and private systems, to ensure that Your child is supplied with a tablet or other device that can be used for virtual learning. I wish to stress emphatically, that acquiring such a device must be the first priority with regard to supplies needed for school.

As was previously announced, The Ministry has a census of those students who may need a device and will provide one on a loan basis for them.

Details will be provided as to where parents may purchase devices for their children.

Again, I re-iterate, One September 21st, 2020, at the usual time, school instructions will commence in the Commonwealth of the Bahamas.

Though plans are centered around that date, The Ministry will monitor developments of COVID-19 and will adjust accordingly. I have said in the past and I will continue to reiterate: Nobody has all the answers. The nature to this fight with COVID19 has meant that what we knew a month ago, can change within a few days. It is for this reason that our academic year will have to adjust as events unfold.

Based on the current outlook, the Ministry has decided that it would be in the best interest of our staff and students to begin the new school year by adapting one hundred percent remote learning. However, as we monitor the status of health conditions over a period of time, if circumstances permit by October 5th, there may be a possible transition from Remote instruction to the Hybrid or Blended Model of learning.

Sir, I state again, one size does not fit all.

Homeschooling

Mr. Speaker, The MOE's transition to virtual education in March of this year prompted a desire in a number of parents to explore the dynamics of homeschooling.

As the MOE is the main provider of education in The Bahamas, it has made provisions for the regulation of homeschooling since 2015. As such, parents who view this mode of education as feasible are encouraged to pursue this option. However, parents must be certain that this option will be effective based on the needs of their child/ren.

Mr. Speaker, There will be robust and carefully crafted procedures for the operation of school this year:

Example:

General Health and Safety Protocols

There will be online training sessions for all connected to the school system this year.

Parents will be invited to register and take courses in online learning to help their children.

The Ministry will provide training sessions in the first two weeks of September for all Educators.

All Staff, especially custodial staff will be trained in the methodology and protocols of a safe and healthy campus environment.

Staff, students, and visitors on school campuses will undergo the necessary safety checks including temperature checks, and ensuring that individuals are wearing masks or face shields.

I wish to assure the public that protocols are in place in the event that students and staff appear to be ill. Meanwhile, the intention is to have at least one nurse stationed at each school.

Classroom Set Up – (Graphic- Classroom Setup)

All classrooms will be in compliance with social distancing protocols. Additionally, students will be engaged in daily training, awareness and sensitivity rituals so that they are kept abreast of current information,

reminded of health and safety protocols and encouraged to be sensitive to others.

Mr. Speaker, some may question whether it is possible for students to comply with social distancing protocols. In an effort to reinforce these measures, security officers and school administrators will be expected to monitor students in this regard.

Movement on Campus (*graphic: Movement on Campus*)

A clear plan of action is being devised to be put in place to direct students' movement while on campus. This includes one way movement on stairwells, entrances, and exits. Additionally, staggered breaks will be implemented to facilitate safe movement on campus.

Mr. Speaker, despite the uncertainty caused by this corona virus the health and safety of our students and staff is our number one priority. We believe that our plans provide clear guidance informed by the best medical advice. We will remain open to continuous monitoring and taking active steps to ensure that all of our students, regardless of their socio-economic standing, have access to the tools which enable them to receive a quality education.

Schools will procure/be provided with alcohol based hand gels or sanitizers containing at least 60% alcohol. They will be placed in classrooms, office area and staff rooms, tuck shops and lunch areas, etc.

Health Protocols

Administrators will maintain an updated list of emergency contacts for all students and staff as well as contacts for health care personnel.

Staff or students who become sick during the course of the day will be referred to the medical personnel on site, without creating a stigma.

Parents/caregivers will be notified and staff will be referred or directed to a health facility.

Students and staff should be cleared by a physician before returning to campus.

Protection, Wellbeing and Social Assistance

Guidance Counselors will be available to provide support to staff and students. The Employee Assistance Program (EAP) will continue to offer its services to staff upon self referral or referral from the principal.

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We will remain open to continuous monitoring and taking active steps to ensure that all of our students, regardless of their socio-economic standing, have access to the tools which enable them to receive a quality education.

There will be further updates as the situations warrant. I ask all to stay tuned to announcements from the Ministry of education.

Again, Parents, Students and the Society at large will know in full details the complete plans for the opening and operation of school as soon as they are made.

Thank you and Good morning.