

BAHAMAS

Mr. President,

My delegation is pleased to participate in this year's Annual Ministerial Review of the Economic and Social Council. I extend congratulations to you and to the members of the Bureau and assure you of my delegation's full support and cooperation during this 2011 Substantive Session of the Council. The Bahamas aligns itself with the statement made by the distinguished representative of Argentina on behalf of the Group of 77 and China.

Mr. President,

The Council's decision to focus this year's Annual Ministerial Review on education is applauded. As noted in the report of the Secretary-General (document E/2011/8) and reiterated by many speakers before me, education has a positive impact on poverty reduction and overall human development, and plays a central role in the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and in the promotion of human rights. The right to education must be fully realized if we are to prepare and better equip successive generations to realize their full potential in order to make a significant contribution to society and to the global economy.

I take this opportunity to reaffirm my Government's unwavering commitment to the MDGs in regards to education. Like many of our sister CARICOM Member States, The Bahamas has surpassed the goals of universal primary education and gender parity in both primary and secondary enrollment. With a literacy rate of over 95 per cent, the Government of The Bahamas has always accorded the highest priority to education and is committed to providing quality, compulsory education free of charge to its populace between the ages of 5 to 16 years. This commitment is reflected in the current allocation for the fiscal year

2011/2012 to the Ministry of Education a significant increase over the 2010/2011 budget year allocation. As a matter of fact, education accounts for one of the largest shares of the Government's budget. Cognizant of the value of education and the importance of its integration into national strategies, The Bahamas Government has increased steadily and consistently its investment in education over the years.

Mr. President,

We have heard the last two days that the building of partnerships is crucial in helping countries achieve educational objectives. The Bahamas Ministry of Education, in partnership with the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), re-launched in August 2010 an innovative educational initiative called 'INSPIRE' – Investing in Students and Programme for the Innovative Reform of Education. The programme, which is aligned with the Government's 10 Year Education Plan, seeks to transform the educational system of The Bahamas with the long-term goal of enhancing skilled human resource capacity to meet the demands of the economy. It takes into account, a National Framework for Technical and Vocational Training; Early Education and Inclusive Education Programmes; and Sector Management with a focus on e-Education, Educational Management Information Systems and ICT.

Mr. President,

Preparing our children and young people for the future is crucial to their success and the overall development of societies. One of the recommendations of the Secretary-General in his aforementioned report refers to the need for a broader vision of education beyond that of basic primary education and the importance of vocational training initiatives. I am pleased to report that my

Government has instituted plans to establish a Career Academy to strengthen the Career and Technical Education sector in Senior Secondary Education (SSE) in order to improve labour market opportunities for high school graduates and to ensure sufficient skilled labour for The Bahamas ongoing economic and industrial development. It is designed to improve graduation rates; to decrease drop-out rates; to increase industry-based training; and to expand employment capacity. Plans are also underway to effect curriculum reform to improve the quality of education and to expand training opportunities for teachers, including a significant allocation for Teacher Education Grants. The Future Teachers of The Bahamas Programme (FTB), which was established in 1995, is yielding positive results. Currently, 201 teacher cadets are participating in the programme (23 per cent males and 77 per cent females).

However, Mr. President, despite these positive initiatives, we continue to face a number of challenges. The increase in school violence, truancy and drop-out rates remain a concern for my Government. In 2008, the Government, in collaboration with the Organization of American States and UNESCO, conducted a Regional Workshop on School Violence Reduction aimed at addressing violence by and against school-age youth. In terms of truancy, the Ministry of Education has strengthened its School Attendance Unit through the implementation of 'Street Patrols' to investigate children seen out of school. Through this initiative, over 95 per cent of the students investigated are returned to school. Male students at risk are offered positive alternatives through mentoring, conflict resolution and behavior modification programmes. My Government is committed to addressing these challenges.

Mr. President

While, it is commendable to undertake initiatives in the area of education, we must be forever mindful of the importance to ensure balance, equity and non-discrimination in the pursuit of our goals. We need to change cultural and attitudinal biases which perpetuate gender stereotype in our educational system. Traditional roles must be expanded and more gender-sensitive strategies and policies must be implemented if we are to improve opportunities for women and girls.

In closing I reiterate the four "As" highlighted in the ECOSOC Special Event on "Partnering with the philanthropic community to promote education" held in February last which called for education to be Available, Affordable, Accessible and Acceptable. Let us strengthen our resolve to make education for all a reality. In the word of Robin Cook *"Education is more than a luxury, it is a responsibility that society owes itself."*

Thank you.