



**MINISTER OF EDUCATION
ADDRESS TO PRESS**

RE: 2020 NATIONAL EXAMINATIONS

MONDAY, 4TH JANUARY, 2021

12 noon

MINISTER OF EDUCATION'S ADDRESS TO PRESS RE 2020
NATIONAL EXAMINATIONS

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This afternoon, I find myself asking the question, what is it that has made it possible for me to stand here today, having stepped into a new year, imbued with confidence in the face of criticism and infused with a spirit of true gratitude? It is the grace of giving.

2020 had its difficulties and it would be very easy for us to overlook the blessings that we received during the past year, such as new additions to families, the relationships that blossomed, the goals that were met, and the myriad of victories. Yes, there were major, indeed seemingly unsurmountable challenges that occurred, but those challenges were met through the grace of giving.

Across the archipelago of The Bahamas, this grace of giving was evident with numerous people giving freely and altruistically, in spite of life's circumstances, giving in the midst of a very severe trial, giving as much as they were able, and, at times, even beyond their ability. Their grace of giving often exceeded our expectations.

From my vantage point, nowhere was this grace of giving more apparent than in the arena of education. It is undeniable that in 2020, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic threatened to ravage our nation's education system, to wreck the solid foundation that had been so painstakingly established over the many decades.. Yet, despite the fact that the system was still laboriously working to repair the damages caused by Hurricane Dorian in 2019, in response to the uncertainties and formidable challenges introduced by COVID-19, the Ministry of Education decided to advance with the sitting of the Bahamas Junior Certificate (BJC) and Bahamas General Certificate of Secondary Education (BGCSE) national

examinations, which began on July 1st, 2020, several months behind schedule.

Why was this decision made? We believed that it was our duty to the children of the nation to offer them the opportunity to take the examinations for which many had prepared so fervently for years, encouraged by parents, guardians, teachers and other concerned supporters. So they were given the choice to sit the examinations. We believed that those who wished to take it should be allowed to exercise their democratic right to do so. This was a choice that, if made, would open the doors of opportunity for many of them. And in offering them this opportunity, the Ministry of Education strove to ensure that all educators and the youth of the nation were treated with the utmost regard for their physical, emotional and mental wellbeing. This was accomplished.

The way ahead was uncertain in numerous ways, but the path was lit by the collective giving nature of those involved. I am convinced that we were all motivated by hope and faith in the education system and I daresay our love of students and country. The support was not given because we had been coerced or because of promised remuneration. Our support was given because we cared for the youth who had been entrusted into our care, and wanted them to accomplish academic goals that they had spent years pursuing. We believed that the Government had an obligation to provide the 2020 BJC and BGCSE candidates with the opportunity to sit the examinations, and that these students should not be denied the right to do so. Parents, guardians, corporate citizens and the Government had invested substantial resources in the successful completion of the 2020 national examinations. Additionally, successful BJC passes constitute one of the criteria for students being granted the Bahamas National High School Diploma. Thus, we considered it essential that those students not be denied that opportunity.

Therefore, once the Competent Authority had advised that it was safe to re-open schools, with the establishment of health protocols, The Ministry met with key stakeholders to ensure that they understood what was being done. Then a public campaign was held using the following to sensitize the public:

- public service announcements
- various social media platforms and
- newspapers

Support was offered to administrators, teachers, invigilators, students and parents – all who would be involved in the administration of the examination process, in the form of counselling, training, and the provision of substantial resources needed to ensure that the Ministry of Health safety protocols were met, including extra classes using face-to-face *and* the Bahamas Learning Channel.

In December, 2020, the results of the national examinations were released, and I declare unequivocally that the entire examination exercise was a success. It was worth the financial, emotional, mental physical and psychological cost. It was a remarkable accomplishment that has clearly disappointed a fair number of naysayers. The task was what it has always been - to ensure that, upon completion of the examiner training, candidate sitting and the marking and grading of the numerous examinations, those who had opted to take them would receive valid and reliable results.

The task has been completed because of the efforts of so many, and I stand here today to say thank you to them for their grace of giving. They took part in building a solid future for our country's youth and ultimately in building a better future for our country.

Cambridge International Examinations (CIE) would not have accredited the BGCSE national examinations if they had had any misgivings that any part of the protocols had been compromised. Their stamp of approval means that those who received grades can use them as their

passport to international top-notch universities or as an avenue to employment. Mr. Waleed Bagadi, Senior Education Contract Manager with CIE stated, “We are therefore pleased to confirm that, despite the challenges, the assessments were administered in an appropriate manner **and are in keeping with international standards.**”

While Cambridge only oversees the BGCSE examination, the same protocols were in place for BJC and have always been.

Perhaps some of you have heard the recent erroneous and misleading claims about the results of the 2020 national examinations. Let me set the record straight for those of you who want to listen to logical explanations.

I would be the first to admit that The Bahamas’ system is not perfect and has its share of challenges. No one can identify any perfect education system. What they can find in education systems where students consistently perform well are these common denominators: the balance of political will, a bi-partisan shared vision for education, a high level of school leadership, the support of key stakeholders, excellent teachers and students and parents who appreciate and support the importance of education. The question then to each of us is: are we all doing our part to ensure that these common denominators are a part of The Bahamas’ education system?

Many students in our education system excel (coming from both independent and government schools), performing well enough to secure scholarships to reputable colleges and universities here and abroad.

How *did* our students perform?

BJC

With the BJC, 10,753 candidates were registered to sit examinations. In 2019, 11,157 candidates registered to sit examinations. Thirteen subjects were offered and students sat from 1 to 12 subjects.

The candidates came from 66 independent or private centres and 50 government centres.

The total number of grades awarded in 2020 was 31,878 compared to 40,701 in 2019.

In 2020, **62.28%** of the candidature achieved grades A-D, compared to 65.54% in 2019, 66.76% in 2018, 63.80% in 2017 and 64.30% in 2016.

Scores in Six subjects improved this year: English Language, Mathematics, Art, Craft Study, Family & Consumer Science and Literature. General Science remained unchanged. Seven subjects improved in 2019, a very slight difference.

We would like to remind individuals that not every candidate takes every subject. Therefore, subject averages speak better to student performance than a national average.

BGCSE

As for the BGCSE examinations, 6,073 candidates were registered to sit examinations. In 2019, 6,454 candidates registered to sit examinations. Twenty-seven subjects were offered and candidates sat from 1 to 15 subjects.

The candidates came from 62 independent or private centres and 39 government centres.

The total number of grades awarded in 2020 was 15,017 compared to 23,810 in 2019. The number of grades awarded might have been

impacted by the fact that many students take BGCSE in the final year, i.e, grade 12 and many of them had already moved on to college, the workforce or were unwilling to take the examinations. The minimally reduced participation rates for 2020 were not unexpected in the middle of such a catastrophic and unprecedented event, and are reflective of the reduced rates experienced by other countries. They are a testimony to the great resilience of Bahamian educators, students, and their parents and guardians. They show that The Bahamas is second to none in learning to cope with adversity, and to emerge successfully from that experience.

In 2020, **68.29%** of the candidature achieved grades A-D, compared to 70.18% in 2019, 70.05% in 2018, 70.82% in 2017 and 71.27% in 2016.

Fifteen subjects showed improved performance in 2020 compared to 13 subjects in 2019. They are: Auto Mechanics, Biology, Bookkeeping & Accounts, Chemistry, Clothing Construction, Combined Science, Commerce, Economics, Electrical Installation, Food & Nutrition, Graphical Communication, History, Music, Office Procedures, and Spanish. The performance in English Language and Literature remain unchanged. **This is progress and it is indeed encouraging and speaks to the resilience of Bahamian educators and students!**

We understand that some have highlighted the decrease in the percentage of candidates receiving at least “C” in five or more subjects, a minimum grade of “D” in at least five subjects and the combination of at least a Grade “C” in Mathematics, English Language and a Science.

It should be remembered that it has been a trend that fewer candidates take the BGCSE examinations in Grade 11 than in Grade 12, and that the postponement of the 2020 exams due to the pandemic led to many students being unable to complete the sittings of a number of examinations or they had entered the work force or gone off to college. Remember, too, that candidates were given an option. All of this could have contributed the high level of absenteeism.

For example, of the 4,542 candidates who registered for BGCSE English, 1352 were absent. Of the 2859 candidates who registered for BGCSE Biology, 1,317 were absent, and of the 2,102 candidates who registered for BGCSE Religious Studies, 788 were absent.

A total of 365 candidates received at least “C” in five or more subjects in 2020 compared to 760 candidates in 2019. This represents 6.01% of the overall candidature. In 2019, 760 candidates received at least “C” in five or more subjects, representing 11.78% of the overall candidature.

The Press Release of 2020 presents detailed statistics. It is our hope that these are used by policy makers, educational leaders, school administrators and other interested parties for forward planning, remediation and improved utilization of human and physical resources.

We are grateful for the invaluable contributions made by Mrs Elcina Duncombe and staff of the Examination and Assessment office in Grand Bahama, school administrators, district superintendents, invigilators, teachers and support staff in the various schools. Of the district superintendents, special mention must be made of Superintendent Dominique McCartney-Russell, who made arrangements to accommodate students who returned to Abaco after having been displaced by Hurricane Dorian. She did a remarkable job of accommodating them at examination centres and ensuring that they took the examinations. In addition, there were Family Island administrators, mailboat captains, bus drivers, members of the Customs Department, and individuals from courier services who assisted us in achieving our remarkable goal.

We also wish to acknowledge the support given by Stephen Austin \ Confidential Printers of Hertford, England, and the advice from the Ministries of Tourism and Foreign Affairs, and the Bahamas High Commission (London).

We extend a special thank you to Under Secretary Serethea Clarke, Assistant Director of Education Evelyn D. Sawyer and the Subject Secretaries, clerical, janitorial and security staff of the Examination & Assessment Division. To the chief examiners, team leaders, markers, invigilators, runners, and recorders, we commend you for your unwavering commitment and the extensive sacrifices made. Faced with daunting lockdowns, postponements, quarantines, illness and curfews, you remained steadfast in your determination to complete the tasks assigned to you. You overcame your sometimes daily fears, fought weariness, regularly reported to marking centres and ultimately reached the end of the journey, victorious. This was done while balancing the often taxing new responsibilities of school and home. It was not easy but you graciously gave of yourselves.

We say to you that you have assisted the Ministry in setting a precedent for positioning the evaluation sector to respond to any future crises. We are grateful!

It is my hope that we will continue to work together, beyond the pandemic, focussed on building a resilient and responsive national examination and assessment section, while meeting the myriad needs of our students.

Of course we must applaud **ALL** students. One student achieved 12 A's at the BJC level. The highest number of BGCSE subjects achieved with A-C grades was 15, a first, and one student achieved 13 A's. They are all our nation's children, the future of our country, and we are so proud of them.

The seven-point grading scale of the BJC and BGCSE national examinations (A-G) indicates measures of positive achievement. It is not a pass-fail scale and we commend all students who took the exams and showed that their years in school had not been in vain. Across the education system, in both independent *and* government schools, students achieved grades ranging from A-G, **ALL** markers of positive achievement.

Yes, 2020 had its extreme difficulties and as mentioned before, it would be very easy for us to overlook the blessings that we received during the past year because of the challenges. Yet even the challenges were blessings in many ways, for they taught us invaluable lessons that will serve us well in 2021 and beyond. Above all, they taught us to recognize the grace of giving.