



**CONTRIBUTION BY**

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AND RAGGED ISLAND**

**2026-2027 BUDGET DEBATE**

**TUESDAY, 16 JUNE, 2026**

Good morning Madam Speaker,

I rise today with humility, gratitude and a deep sense of responsibility to make my contribution to the 2026/2027 Budget Debate.

I must first give thanks to Almighty God, who has guided every step of my journey.

Madam Speaker, I also wish to congratulate you on your re-election to this Honorable House and on your return to the Speakership. The confidence reposed in you is a reflection of the regard in which you are held, and I wish you continued wisdom, patience and fairness as you preside over the business of this place.

And thank you Madam speaker for granting me 2 hours to speak today. I undertake not to use all of it - but I fully intend to use most of it.

I thank the Prime Minister, the Honourable Philip Edward "Brave" Davis, for the confidence he has again reposed in me as Deputy Prime Minister of the Commonwealth of The Bahamas and now as Minister of Education, Science and Technology.

I thank my Cabinet colleagues, my parliamentary colleagues, the public officers who support the machinery of government, and all those who continue to labor in service to our people.

And, I thank once again the people of Exuma and Ragged Island.

They have returned me to this Honorable House for a **third consecutive term**. They have done so with confidence, with clarity, and with an expression of trust that I do not take lightly.

**We were successful in every polling division in Exuma and Ragged Island.** Every single one for the second consecutive time, despite significant resources marshalled against my team and me personally, in the hopes of swaying the outcome in the favor of a privileged few.

Exuma and Ragged Island, I promise to continue to serve you with dignity and integrity.

Thank you for your trust, your prayers, and your support.

For those who sought to weaponize public sentiment prior to the election hoping for a different outcome **that battle is finished.**

I offer an olive branch to all, including persons who ran against me. Let's work together for the betterment of Exuma & Ragged Island and our entire country.

Madam Speaker, I must also thank my family.

No one in public life serves alone; families carry burdens the public never sees, and make sacrifices that are never recorded in the Hansard – the record of this house.

So today, I again publicly thank my wife Cecillia, my daughters Chelsea and Chloe and my son Izak, who is here with me today.

I thank my siblings and my extended family, Team Cooper, stalwart councilors, my supporters and the many people who have walked with me and prayed for me on this journey.

Madam Speaker,

I come to this debate at a particular moment in the life of our nation.

On May 12, the Bahamian people renewed the mandate of this Progressive Liberal Party Government.

For the first time in nearly 30 years, the people of The Bahamas returned a government for a second consecutive term to reward Prime Minister Davis for focused leadership, and our team for the progress we have made.

That is no small thing. It ain't no Lil Deal Madam Speaker.  
It's a Big Deal!

The Bahamian people saw our work.

They saw an economy rescued and tourism restored to record results. In fact, when we came to office tourist arrivals were under five million in 2021. As at the end of 2025 it was 12.5 million. In fact, we are on track to exceed 2025 and notably stop-overs are up 5% over prior year.

The Bahamian people saw investment return – Record results of an estimated \$15 billion in new Foreign Direct Investment.

I thank the team at the Bahamas Investment Authority.

They saw a government that, despite imperfections and challenges, worked every day to move this country from recovery to rebuilding and from rebuilding to progress.

When we came to office in 2021, this country was still recovering from the triple blows of Hurricane Dorian, the COVID-19 pandemic and the FNM's mismanagement.

Families were hurting. Businesses were uncertain. Tourism had been devastated.

Our economy had been downgraded numerous times, and our people were looking for stability.

But this administration did not panic. We went to work.

We helped move this country from crisis to recovery, from recovery to growth, and from growth to renewed national momentum.

I served during the last term as Minister of Tourism, Investments and Aviation.

That was my first opportunity to serve in Cabinet, and the privilege of a lifetime.

I thank my teams for making me look good.

Tourism is our number one industry in The Bahamas.

Tourism is food on the table.

Tourism is taxi drivers, straw vendors, hotel workers, cooks, entertainers, entrepreneurs, tour operators, boat captains, artisans, farmers, fishermen, and small business owners.

Tourism is a mother paying for uniforms.

Madam Speaker, during the last term, we saw record growth in tourism year after year culminating in more than 12.5 million visitors last year.

We restored and expanded airlift, deepened partnerships, launched new campaigns, engaged new markets, prioritized the 16 Family Island destinations and empowered hundreds of Bahamian entrepreneurs through the TDC and Tourism Development Fund that we formed and through the spin-off from tourism.

I thank the Aviation teams.

Together we embarked up the revitalization of 19 airports, the largest airport and aviation upgrade in the history of the Bahamas. We laid out the national aviation strategy, and pioneered the space industry in the Bahamas. We

improved our safety standards and kept our sector ratings as Tier 1. We have signed multiple partner MOU's and 10 Air Services Agreement and expanded airlift. **I eagerly look forward to the continuation of the progress on the many projects and initiatives we have advanced. I am particularly proud of the work we have done with family island airports – just like we promised we would do. I have often said that infrastructure for these islands is dignity.**

And we demonstrated that when tourism grows, the wider economy grows.

That growth put more money in the pockets of Bahamians, dramatically improved direct and indirect

government revenues, and justified the upgrades by the rating agencies.

I sincerely thank the technical teams at Tourism led by Director General – Latia Duncombe.

I thank former MP's – John Pinder and former Cabinet Minister Basil McIntosh and I wish them well.

## **THE SHIFT**

I now take on a new challenge, and I rest easy knowing that that the tourism portfolio is now in the capable and safe hands of the member for Englerston.

Yes, our first term was about recovery - restoring jobs, tourism, confidence and credibility.

But this second term must be about something deeper: building the Bahamian people.

Because if tourism helped us rebuild the economy, education must now help us build the future.

Notwithstanding – the many tourism accolades I received and records achieved; I want to say as I said at UB North a few weeks ago that **the greatest resource of our country has never been its beaches – but has always been our people.**

The challenge before us is to unlock their full potential.

I now serve proudly as Minister of Education, Science and Technology. I thank the Member of Parliament for Englerston the Hon. Glenys Hanna-Martin, who served as Minister of Education. I will build on her successes. **She brought passion and an acute nationalistic pride to the role and I applaud her.**

None of us succeed alone Madam Speaker and I therefore acknowledge and thank the teams of the MOEST, that I have assumed including:

- Permanent Secretary - Lorraine Armbrister,
- Director – Dominique McCartney Russell,
- Under Secretary, Deputy Permanent Secretaries  
Deputy Director & Assistant Directors, and all  
managers and employees who give of themselves  
each day.
- Of course, Sen. Hon. Keenan Johnson joins me as  
Parliamentary Secretary. He is already having to  
shape the future, and I look forward to working with  
him.

Please give them all a round of applause.

## **A SNAP SHOT**

I promised you earlier that I will not short change you today. I expect however to focus on several important themes:

- 1) **Building people:** Education as national development.
- 2) **Every child matters:** Equity, inclusion and dignity.
- 3) **Multiple pathways for success:**
- 4) **Ownership:** Preparing Bahamians to own the careers, industries and future economy.

At the outset, let me assure the Bahamian people that I will face the challenge of Education, Science & Technology in the same way I did Tourism, Investments and Aviation – with the same level of **seriousness, innovation, energy and focus.**

## **BUILDING ON PROGRESS**

We ran on a blueprint of continuing the progress.

Madam Speaker, if something is working, there is no need to re-invent the wheel. We will enhance where necessary.

We will not reset.

There will be no stop, review and cancel.

I will focus on finding solutions to what is not working well.

**We have been making great gains in education.**

We have gotten back to a focus on the basics of literacy and numeracy.

There is an opportunity to continue to improve our performance in math and we continue to deploy strategies to do so.

We are also expanding Upskill Bahamas.

We have offered 8,000 course placements to date. And we are adding 5,000 more in the next cohort.

We are expanding the national School Breakfast Program to make sure that we can serve breakfast, improve dignity and attendance daily throughout the nation.

We last week we celebrated the serving of 2 million breakfasts and will begin running a pilot in September 2026 in junior high school.

I signed amendments yesterday to the curriculum to reflect the new Bahamian history textbook completed by Englerston.

And we will implement the mandates laid out in the Education Act 2026 and the Early Childhood Care Act 2026.

I have, of course, been in this portfolio for less than one month.

I do not come here today to suggest that I have already mastered every file, solved every problem, or answered

every question, I have not even fully read my briefing notes – it's a lot.

[Hold up briefing note. "Englerston left me home work"].

I'm not even close to where I want to be.

But I come here with energy, excitement, and a willingness to listen.

I come with respect for the educators and public officers who have carried this system for many years with great sacrifice of their "off-time" and even their money.

And I come with a firm conviction that there is no portfolio in government more central to the future of The Bahamas than Education, Science and Technology.

Many people know me as a finance guy. A businessman and an entrepreneur who is inspired by his past

accomplishments to ensure more Bahamian ownership of the tourism industry and our overall economy.

Many of you know me as DPM and former MOTIA.

But some may not remember that I once stood before a classroom as a public high school teacher, in the subjects of economics, commerce and accounting.

**I have often joked that I served two years hard time – in high school.**

But the truth is, that experience never left me.

It gave me a deep respect for teachers.

It gave me a front-row seat to the hopes, struggles, talent and potential of Bahamian students.

And perhaps that is why I view this new assignment with such promise, passion and with such humility.

Education changed the trajectory of my life.

I attended public schools.

Forbes Hill All-Age School.

L.N. Coakley High School.

The College of the Bahamas.

I came through the public education system straight through.

Like many Bahamians, opportunity did not come to me wrapped in privilege. **I fought for everything.**

No famous family. No rich uncle. A father who died prematurely – with no insurance policy. A mother who

didn't attend college but who understood that education was the great equalizer.

We were poor. But she had faith in God. We were all going to college or trade school whether we liked it or not, and we did - **all 12 of us.**

When I left Exuma for Nassau at the age of sixteen, I worked while attending the College of The Bahamas – on scholarship.

I slept on the floor of my sister's apartment.

I worked at a gas station - pumping gas and cleaning windshields to sustain myself.

Eventually, through scholarship, sacrifice, discipline and the grace of God, doors opened for me to study abroad.

I returned home.

I fulfilled my bonded obligations with the government of  
The Bahamas.

I worked.

I built.

I served.

I pursued ownership and wealth – as an entrepreneur.

Madam Speaker, I tell that story because my story is not  
mine alone.

It is the story of thousands of Bahamians who came from  
poverty, from humble beginnings and found a pathway  
through education, work-ethic and integrity.

It is the story of a public-school student who was given a  
chance.

It is the story of what happens when a country invests in its people, when we invest in education.

I leave it there for now, but you could read more about it in my book "Fishinin on the Rocks".

Madam Speaker, I share that not for politics, but to speak directly to the Bahamian parents watching today.

To the mother working a double shift just to buy school uniforms.

To the father praying the streets do not claim his teenage son.

I see your sacrifice. I was that boy.

**And my promise to you is this: when you hand us your greatest treasure at the school gate each**

**morning, we will fight for their future as if it were our own.**

## **THE GREATEST PUBLIC GOOD**

Madam Speaker, I did not just read about the values of the Progressive Liberal Party in a textbook.

I have lived them.

Opportunity.

Dignity.

Access.

Fairness.

Empowerment.

The belief that the child from Forbes Hill deserves the same chance as the child from anywhere else.

That is why I believe, with every fiber of my being, that education is the greatest public good any nation can provide.

I will say again – **if education is not the greatest public good of a nation – nothing is.**

**There is no greater investment, no greater equalizer, no greater instrument of national development.**

Every ministry has important work to do.

National Security protects our people; Health & Wellness cares for them; Finance manages the state's resources;

Tourism drives the economy; Works builds our

infrastructure; Social Services supports the vulnerable.

But education supplies them all – the economy’s skilled workers, the public service’s professionals, the health system’s nurses and doctors, national security’s young people with pathways instead of desperation, and tourism’s chefs, managers and engineers.

Yes, Madam Speaker, Education supplies the future.

And let me be candid: every other ministry in this Cabinet spends much of its budget managing the downstream consequences of what education does, or fails to do.

And National Security too often arrests the young people for whom we did not build a pathway.

**If we get education right, we reduce pressure everywhere else.**

We reduce unemployment, crime and dependency; we improve productivity; we strengthen families and grow the economy.

**Education is the foundation ministry – the human development ministry on which this nation’s long-term success depends.**

**This Ministry is the ultimate upstream supplier of our citizen’s dignity and our national destiny.**

We do not simply spend the nation’s wealth; we manufacture the capacity to create it.

**And when we fix the classroom, we fix the Commonwealth of The Bahamas.**

**SHOW ME THE MONEY**

It is easy for governments to speak about education; it is harder to fund it. Budgets reveal priorities.

And if there is any doubt about the seriousness with which this administration takes education, one need only examine the resources being directed to the education sector.

During the 2025/2026 fiscal year, the combined allocation for the Ministry of Education, the Department of Education exceeded \$353 million

In 2020, the investment was around \$320 million, so that is about a 10%-plus increase since we came to office.

This year, there will be approximately \$383.6 million in recurrent expenditure being invested directly in education.

That is before we even begin to speak fully about \$63 million of capital works and \$7m in school breakfast – we are then looking at an investment in education of approximately \$450 million a year when the dust settles.

The only thing we spend more on in this country is healthcare.

This is one of the clearest signs that this Government understands that **the future of The Bahamas is being written in classrooms today.**

As a businessman, I view education as an investment.

When we invest in education, we invest in every future doctor, teacher, engineer, entrepreneur, police officer,

nurse, scientist, artist, tradesman and skilled worker this nation will ever produce.

And as much money as we see in the budget, to be frank, it is still not enough.

St Barnabas – it's still not enough.

People often ask where the money goes.

Well, it goes into classrooms: into paying teachers, feeding children, scholarships, and special education.

It goes into the people who show up every day to shape young Bahamian minds.

Education is delivered by people.

No education system rises above the quality of its teachers, its leadership, or the commitment of those who deliver it.

We continue to invest in allowances and professional development for our educators.

Education, though, is far more than salaries and allowances.

Students need resources, teachers need tools, and schools need support, repairs and infrastructure that keeps the system functioning for the daily experience of students.

## **IMMEDIATE CHALLENGES**

As we prepare for the new academic year, our immediate focus is ensuring every school is ready to welcome

students and teachers on the first day, with repairs and critical infrastructure addressed.

However, Madam Speaker, we must move beyond **a cycle of emergency repairs every summer.**

We are placing renewed emphasis on building internal maintenance capacity. Our objective is to establish systems, personnel, and processes that allow for preventative and ongoing maintenance throughout the school year.

Schools should not have to wait until June and then July for budget drawdowns to fix what breaks for September.

Stronger internal maintenance capacity and process is how we end that cycle.

A second and equally pressing challenge is **the shortage of teachers** within the public education system. Current internal estimates indicate a shortfall of roughly 300 educators across various disciplines and islands. This challenge is not unique to The Bahamas, as education systems around the world continue to compete for qualified teachers. This is compounded by geopolitical pressures. Nevertheless, we are taking decisive action.

I have asked Parliamentary Secretary Keenan Johnson , who is leading an urgent and coordinated effort with the Ministry, the Department of Public Service, teacher-training institutions, and other stakeholders to identify and fill many of these vacancies before the start of the new school year.

Our goal is simple: every classroom should have a qualified teacher, and every student should have access to the quality education they deserve.

We are approaching these challenges with focus to ensure the education system is ready to deliver for Bahamian students from day one.

## **UNIVERSITY OF THE BAHAMAS**

We are also investing in higher education.

The University of The Bahamas remains our national university and one of the most important institutions in this country.

This budget provides nearly \$44 million in support to the University of The Bahamas.

The University of The Bahamas remains at the centre of our vision for higher education, research and innovation.

As the country's premier tertiary institution, its immediate

priority is clear: **achieving full institutional**

**accreditation** and continuing to strengthen the quality,

credibility, and international recognition of the education it

provides.

Nowhere is the future of the University more evident than

at UB North in Grand Bahama, where there is tremendous

opportunity ahead – particularly once student housing is

developed. **It is a great vision to see an emerging**

**university town for regional and international**

**students, supporting the surge of growth in that**

**economy.**

I was ever so proud to meet with the Board, and Senior Executives of UB – my alma mater. I thank Chairman Maynard – Gibson, President Blaine and the entire team at UB for their steady work.

## **BTVI**

There is a need to shift away from the outdated notion that university education is the only pathway to success.

The Bahamas needs doctors, lawyers, architects and accountants, yes.

But we also need captains, electricians, plumbers, mechanics, marine technicians, renewable energy technicians, chefs, coders, welders, masons, carpenters, boat builders, aircraft technicians, hospitality professionals and entrepreneurs.

**So, the Bahamas Technical and Vocational Institute receives approximately \$12.7 million.**

I am pleased to note that BTVI's recent accreditation by the Council for Occupational Education, a significant milestone that reflects the hard work of its leadership, faculty, staff, and students. This achievement demonstrates that BTVI is continuing to raise standards and position itself as an institution capable of competing and collaborating on the international stage.

Looking ahead, we are also pursuing new strategic partnerships that will expand opportunities for students and faculty alike. This includes strengthening our existing relationship with Algonquin College and exploring additional collaborations with leading institutions that can

help advance research, technical training, innovation, and academic excellence.

As demand for technical and vocational training continues to grow, it has become increasingly clear that BTVI has outgrown its existing outdated facilities and is in urgent need of a modern, purpose-built campus capable of meeting the needs of today's students and tomorrow's economy.

To address this need, the Government has identified approximately 30 acres of land in the vicinity of Government High School as the proposed site for a new BTVI campus. This development represents far more than a construction project; it is an investment in the future of

Bahamian talent, innovation, and economic competitiveness.

We have already secured a \$10 million financing facility to advance the planning and design phases of this transformative initiative. Our long-term vision is to create a world-class technical education campus that will serve thousands of students annually and become the centerpiece of technical and vocational education in The Bahamas.

Mr. Speaker, the full development of this campus is expected to represent an investment of approximately \$250 million over several phases.

I sincerely thank Chairman Elvin Taylor and the Board of BTVI and President Keyshana Bastian for their vision

stewardship during this important period of growth and transformation.

A skilled tradesman with discipline, certification and opportunity can get good paying jobs, build wealth, create jobs, support a family, and contribute powerfully to national development.

[if in doubt. Just read that book called the millionaire next door].

We must restore dignity to technical education.

As my mother said you if you don't go to college, you will learn a trade: **"No one can fire you from a trade"**.

A certified Bahamian plumber, a marine technician, an aviation mechanic – these are the master builders of our economy.

## **THE BAHAMAS POLYTECHNIC**

The Government's vision for a National Polytechnic continues to advance. Significant groundwork has already been undertaken as we assess international models, engage stakeholders, and examine how best to align technical and vocational education with the needs of a modern Bahamian economy.

The Bahamas Polytechnic Institute on Wulff Road is in advance stage of completion and we undertake to continue the progress.

Our vision is a nationally recognized institution that elevates technical and vocational education and aligns it directly with the needs of industry.

The institution will work closely with industry partners, employers, BTVI, and international accrediting bodies to ensure programs remain relevant, responsive, and connected to real employment opportunities.

We need our doctors and our master tradespeople, and we will stop pretending that one matters more than the other.

This government will respect them, certify them, and elevate them.

### **National Diploma**

This is why, Madam Speaker, we are re-assessing the National Diploma and sharpening our focus on **Technical and Vocational Education & Training (TVET)**.

We are actively exploring the introduction of additional secondary school diploma pathways beginning with the 2027 academic year. This initiative reflects international best practice, where students are afforded multiple pathways to success while maintaining high standards and a common goal of secondary school completion.

Under this approach, students would have the opportunity to pursue diplomas aligned with their strengths, interests, and career aspirations, including academic, technical and vocational, and special education pathways.

So, we would be looking at three diploma pathways:

- 1) An academic diploma with an honors distinction as well for exceptional academic performance.**

**2) A vocational diploma.**

**3) a special education diploma.**

Such a framework would engender dignity for each child.

Whilst better preparing them to be more productive citizens and for university and BTVI and for apprenticeships, the workforce, while helping to reduce disengagement and improve retention throughout the secondary school system.

We are not pulling this out of thin air madam speaker.

The Education Commission conducted more than 50 consultations across The Bahamas and provided a number of recommendations to modernize secondary education.

We intend to continue those consultations, reconnect with the Commission, and seek further input from educators,

parents, employers, unions and the wider public as we consider implementation.

This reform has the potential to support our ambitious goal of increasing graduation rates to 85 percent by 2030 while better aligning education with the needs of a modern Bahamian economy.

Madam Speaker, we are not alone in recognizing the importance of technical and vocational education. Nations such as Germany have demonstrated that world-class economies are built not only by university graduates but also by highly skilled technicians, tradespeople, and apprentices. Their experience reminds us that vocational education must never be treated as a second choice, but as an equally dignified pathway to prosperity,

entrepreneurship, and national development. We will learn from international best practice while building a distinctly Bahamian system that responds to the needs of our people and our economy.

**We have already driven the national graduation rate to a record 59 percent in 2025 – the highest since the Bahamas High School Diploma began.**

That's progress – and we are not stopping there.

Around the world, countries that have consistently achieved exceptional educational outcomes, including Finland, remind us that excellence and equity are not opposing goals. High-performing systems succeed not because they filter children out, but because they invest early, support teachers, embrace inclusion, and recognize

that education must develop the whole person. As we modernize education in The Bahamas, we will learn from international best practice while building solutions rooted in Bahamian realities.

## **SCHOLARSHIPS**

We are investing significantly in scholarships, \$14 million dollars, plus another \$25m paid direct to UB and BTVI directly.

Talent is distributed throughout The Bahamas; opportunity must be too.

The scholarship portfolio includes major support for University of The Bahamas scholarships, BTVI scholarships, international scholarships and other awards

that help Bahamians pursue tertiary education and professional training.

That is how we tell the child in Exuma, or Andros, or Grand Bahama, or Cat Island, or MICAL, or Long Island, that their dreams are just as critical as those of the child in Nassau.

By leveraging partnerships with new and existing foundations and directly with universities, **we will dramatically increase the number of scholarships offered to Bahamians with a renewed focus of Family Island and low-income families.**

## **INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS**

We also continue to support independent schools.

Whether a child attends a public school or a private school, we have a duty to invest in that child. We have budgeted \$17m for independent schools.

Because when you walk through schools, when you speak to teachers, when you listen to parents, when you see children with extraordinary potential, or special needs, you quickly realize that every additional dollar invested wisely in education has the power to change a life.

**That is why I will be a relentless advocate for the children of this country.**

I want to say a word about **PARTNERSHIPS**.

Unlike many ministries, we do not operate from a single building. We operate across an archipelago. 161 schools.

24 islands and cays. Almost 6,000 employees. More than 40,000 students.

No nation has ever educated too many people, become too skilled, or regretted investing in its children.

Precisely because we know the state cannot ever provide enough budget, we are being innovative ourselves and propose to create a Foundation for partnership engagement.

I am pleased to announce that **today the Cabinet approved the Bahamas Education Science Technology [BEST] Foundation** for alums, private donors, local and foreign investors to donate to education in an orderly and transparent way. We will seek to ensure that it is a tax compliant structure in as many int'l

jurisdictions as possible to enhance attractiveness for contributions.

**I am also pleased to announce that we will launch an “Adopt a School” program** for active participation of the business and investment community as well as churches and social groups.

And we will honor our partners and stakeholders appropriately. We will begin a steady renaming of our school in honor of the partners who contributed to education across the country. **I am pleased to announce that in the coming months the primary school in Roker’s Point Exuma will be renamed the P.E. Ferguson primary** School after a prolific educator an extraordinary Exumian Mr. Pembroke E. Ferguson. He is

co-incidentally the father of Bishop Franklyn Ferguson of the COGOP – my Sunday school teacher.

I have committed to my predecessor that the renaming of the Columbus Primary School will come shortly.

And we are advancing a number of special committees, projects and initiatives that support key areas of our mandate.

I thank the various stakeholders for their contributions, their partnership and their money.

## **INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS**

The Ministry also currently maintains relations with seven different unions and employee representative bodies.

The success of education depends upon the people who deliver it.

And, so, our engagement with unions must be serious, respectful and productive. I have an open-door policy for teachers and for unions.

I believe we can reach resolution on most matters through continued dialogue, good faith and mutual recognition of both the needs of educators, the dignity of students and the fiscal realities of the country.

No minister succeeds alone.

The work is carried daily by thousands of dedicated public servants – teachers, principals, school administrators, counsellors, NAECOB, janitors, bus drivers, security personnel, librarians, archivists, maintenance teams, clerical staff, technical officers, and countless others who rarely receive public recognition.

Today, I pause to I thank them all. **THANK YOU!**

## **UWI – CARICOM**

Education also does not exist in isolation.

Since 1963, The Bahamas has maintained a longstanding and strategic partnership with the University of the West Indies as a contributing member of CARICOM.

Upon completion of their studies, recipients of UWI tuition waivers or subventions are expected to return to The Bahamas and contribute professionally in the field for which they were trained.

I share that we have committed \$6m to this initiative, because the Bahamian people must understand the scope of the responsibility.

There are many challenges that have existed for decades, opportunities we must seize, reforms we must take and outcomes we must improve.

So let us have an honest conversation about the current state of education in The Bahamas, and what the public for many years has often referred to as **the "D" Average**

We in education do not accept that this is not an way to measure our nation's progress in education. Classifying it that way was an inaccurate and tragic mistake. However, we do admit that it has stuck.

But we say emphatically that there is not an appropriate a statistically possible way to make this calculation.

We can get average by subject but there is no way to accurately assess a national average.

But it has become part of the national vocabulary – a shorthand for public frustration.

And it has become a symbol of genuine concern about the performance of our education system.

Madam Speaker, I understand the frustration behind that label, and I will not pretend the results do not need to improve – they do.

But this Minister will not perpetuate that narrative.

And, I reject the idea that the label belongs to our children.

We have capable young people, many of whom an outdated system has not yet unlocked.

**So, we intend to stop grading only the students, and start grading the system that is meant to serve**

**them – and we will be measured on whether we fix it.**

We will continue to communicate on the appropriate metrics on which we should be measured. Our challenge as a nation is not producing students who pass examinations.

It is producing citizens who can thrive.

**We will stop teaching for certificates and teach for careers -**

**And for real life as good, decent human beings.**

Citizens who can read with understanding, think critically, solve problems, use technology responsibly, communicate clearly, work collaboratively, compete globally, build

businesses, support families, serve communities, and contribute meaningfully to national life.

We must be honest and clear-eyed about this, while not being derogatory.

There are too many children who are not reading at the level they should.

Too many students are struggling with mathematics.

Too many young people leave school without the skills employers need.

Too many students with special needs waiting too long for support.

Too many parents are still disengaged – even with collection up to 85 percent as of the last complete data

submitted in the 2024 school year. Too many report cards still go uncollected, and that is not good enough.

And yes – too many of our young people still leave school without the certificate they came for.

I will not pretend otherwise –

I have not come here to pretend every challenge emerged yesterday.

But The Bahamas is capable. We are not without talent, ideas or resources.

What we must bring now is even more focus, more discipline, more urgency, more accountability, more engagement and more partnership.

And a willingness to measure success not by speeches, not by photo ops, but by outcomes.

## **The EDUCATION ACT**

The passage of the Education Act 2026 provides an important foundation for the work ahead.

The Early Childhood Care Commission Act 2026 brings regulations, management and operational framework for day care centers and pre-schools.

It modernizes the legal framework, strengthens accountability, and creates opportunities for reform.

It strengthens the basis for accountability.

It creates opportunities for reform.

Attendance at age 4 is now mandatory, and we are actively putting in place the enabling framework to support this mandate!

But legislation alone will not transform a system.

It will take the buy-in and partnership of students, parents and communities.

Now we must do the work and implement them with dispatch.

Under that Act, I am obligated to bring forward the regulations that give it operational force.

## **BAHAMAS EDUCATION SECTOR TRANSFORMATION PROJECT**

One of the clearest examples of this Government's commitment to transformation is the Bahamas Education Sector Transformation Project.

The Government of The Bahamas secured financing from the Caribbean Development Bank in the amount of \$43.3 million for this initiative.

The BEST Project will assist the Ministry in its continued efforts to transform the education sector by improving quality, relevance and equitable access across basic education in The Bahamas.

The main outputs include the construction of the East Grand Bahama Comprehensive School. Central Grand Bahama I've been advised of your commentary and I will engage with all stakeholders on this matter.

It also includes institutional strengthening through consultancy services for the development of an IT Strategy and Plan for the Ministry.

And it includes capacity building through training and professional development for 2,000 principals and teachers under the CDB/CARICOM/OECS Let's REAP initiative. We will expedite these initiatives.

Educators from New Providence, Grand Bahama and Long Island have already begun reaping the benefits of this capacity building program facilitated by the University of the West Indies.

It is also changing leadership, practice, expectations, and the support available to those who teach our children.

## **SPECIAL EDUCATION**

One area that has distressed me early is the special education need across the country.

If we are serious when we say **every child matters**, then we must prove it in how we support children with special needs.

**Yes, every child matters.**

**Not some children. Not most children. Every child.**

In our public school system, we estimate more than 2,200 students with special needs are enrolled and supported by more than 110 teachers and 90 teacher aides nationwide.

The ministry has established 67 Special Education Units and pull-out programs across The Bahamas, including 22

Family Island programs.

We are moving the system from a reactive “wait-to-fail” approach toward a more preventative, data-driven approach to intervention and support.

We do not have adequate resources for testing in the Family Islands nor enough space to proactively provide support when testing is complete. The Beacon School in GBI alone has a waiting list of more than 50 students.

What an amazing school by the way.

Clean and equipped, with a car wash, agriculture, crafts shop with handmade products, where children can begin the learning of vocational skills. A café – with a healthy menu, and a motivated team of professionals – led by Principal McKenzie.

But there are needs beyond the capacity of the Beacon school and this is why we will be establishing additional units in the Bartlett Hill and the Holmes Rock School that will be retrofitted for special needs by September 2026.

We can and must bring dignity to these students. We will continue advancing work on a national training and Diploma for teachers in Special Education to strengthen local capacity and build a sustainable pipeline of trained Bahamian educators. This is why in 2027 in collaboration with UB we intend to train 75 additional special needs teachers

Inclusion is a national responsibility and a reflection of our values as a country.

**A nation is not judged by how it treats the strong;  
it is judged by how it protects the vulnerable.**

Now, I want to speak directly to the parent who has stayed up at night worried because their child learns a little differently – to the families fighting for a diagnosis and feeling left in the shadows: I see you.

A child with autism, dyslexia, or a speech delay is not a burden to the state.

Our promise is simple: we will not leave a single child behind.

Every child deserves a chance to thrive with dignity, and we **MUST** help to improve their chance to succeed in a dynamic world.

## **TECHNOLOGY**

My ministry is also intentionally the Ministry of **Science** and **Technology**.

We cannot prepare Bahamian children for yesterday's economy; we must prepare them for tomorrow.

That means stronger **STEM** education.

That means a stronger push in **DIGITAL** literacy.

Better mathematics outcomes. Coding, Robotics, Artificial intelligence, Marine science, Renewable energy,

Agricultural technology, Digital literacy, Climate resilience,

Hospitality technology, Creative industries, Financial

literacy, Entrepreneurship, Innovation & Empowerment.

Ownership, Madam Speaker. Ownership!

Technology is now part of the basic infrastructure of opportunity. **Digital Literacy** will feature prominently.

We are embarking upon an aggressive initiative of providing a laptop or tablet to every child and every teacher in every school, with a pilot initiative being launched this September.

This begins an aggressive push for digital literacy – building the enabling infrastructure, guidelines and the teacher training to ensure these devices are used safely and responsibly, not as toys, but tools for learning, coding and AI.

It is not enough to teach children about technology.

We must also use technology to improve learning.

Adaptive learning tools and AI-assisted instruction, used responsibly, can identify where a student is struggling and personalize support – including for Family Island students.

But technology cannot replace the teacher. We will employ international best practice patterning against best practice set in places like Singapore.

Our devices will only be as good as what runs on it.

So, each device will be paired with the adaptive learning tools and the teacher support that turn access into real achievement.

We want to ensure that the child in Mayaguana, or Crooked Island, or Acklins, or Bimini, or Black Point or Eight Mile Rock, has access to the same digital world as the child in New Providence.

A modern education system cannot be built on unequal access to technology.

I noted before that we are preparing our children for careers not just certificates.

This is why we will continue the **Innovate 242**, co-chaired with the Minister for Grand Bahama, to endeavor to continue to build an ecosystem where tech industry can thrive.

We will work with the new Ministry for Innovation and continue to leverage MOU's with Tech Hubs around the world like HUB350 in Canada, KAUSTS in Saudi Arabia and in **Qatar Science & Tech Park** in Qatar where we have already built relationships.

**MARITIME ACADEMY**

**The National Maritime Academy** receives approximately \$1.69 million.

The maritime sector represents one of the greatest opportunities for economic growth, workforce development, and national advancement in The Bahamas.

That is why this administration remains committed to building a world-class pipeline of Bahamian maritime professionals.

A major step was the National Maritime Instruction and Training Act, which formalizes maritime education and training in The Bahamas.

Today, I am also pleased to announce the appointment of Dr. Brenda Cleare to join the Ministry of Education whose experience and vision will be invaluable as we continue to

expand maritime education and training opportunities throughout our archipelago – from Grand Bahama to Mayaguana.

Madame Speaker, no discussion of the National Maritime Academy would be complete without recognizing the extraordinary contribution of **His Excellency Lowell J.**

**Mortimer.** Through his generosity, leadership, and unwavering belief in the potential of young Bahamians, he created an institution that has opened doors to shipping, maritime and logistics. His commitment to maritime education has helped lay the foundation for what can become the third pillar of our economy, and the nation owes him a debt of gratitude.

## **TRACKING OUR GAPS**

We must also strengthen the bridge between education and employment.

For too long, there has been a gap between what students learn and what the economy needs.

Employers say they cannot find workers with the right skills.

Graduates say they cannot find good jobs.

We will work with the Department of Labor to help to bridge these gaps.

The World Bank reports that 78 percent of unemployed Bahamians already hold at least a secondary credential.

That tells us our challenge is not simply getting young people through school.

It is making sure that what they learn matches what the economy actually needs.

We must close that gap.

That means stronger partnerships with industry, curriculum informed by workforce needs, and more internships, apprenticeships and technical certifications.

And we must know where our graduates go – whether they find work, whether their training matches their employment, and whether employers are satisfied – and use that data to improve.

The economy must speak to education, and education must respond to the economy.

As a part of our technology push, one of the initiatives we are examining closely is a pilot program to better track graduate outcomes and workforce readiness.

For too long, we have educated students without always having a clear enough picture of what happens after they graduate.

How long does it take graduates to find work? Which programs produce the strongest outcomes? Are employers satisfied, and where are the skills gaps?

That is why we are examining our national graduate-outcomes and labour-market intelligence capability.

The concept is to track graduates at key intervals after completion of their studies to better understand

employment outcomes, career progression, earnings and workforce participation.

Recently, I met with a group of our Bahamian scholarship students studying abroad.

What troubled me most is that too many of our most qualified young people – even on scholarships paid for by taxpayers are actively planning to build their lives abroad, even as employers here say they cannot find the workers they need.

This system therefore, will help to bridge the vexing Brain Drain Gap.

And by the way, when I got a scholarship to go abroad, I understood that I was bonded to return and work for

government for the number of years that they supported me.

I am asking the scholarship board to consider bringing this system of national service back in the shortest practical timeframe.

## **HOSPITALITY & CULINARY INSTITUTE**

**Madam Speaker,**

The Hospitality & Culinary Institute (HBI) is especially important in our economy given the dominance of the tourism industry.

Having served as Minister of Tourism, I know what employers in that sector are saying.

I know the demand for culinary talent, hospitality management, customer service excellence, digital

marketing, aviation support, logistics, event management and entrepreneurial capacity.

So, I will be meeting soon with the BHTA, promotion boards, the cruise lines and Nassau Cruise Port to partner in this initiative.

The proposed pilot would begin with the Culinary and Hospitality programs at the University of The Bahamas.

That is a sensible place to start. But it must not end there.

I foreshadow that we will bring the **school of hospitality back to its glory days and take it further to the development of a PPP to develop a Training Hotel in The Bahamas.**

We must assert ourselves as the regional leaders that we are in the hospitality training space.

## **CAPAS**

Madam Speaker, the past fiscal year was a landmark year for arts education in The Bahamas.

After literally decades of unrealized dreams and ambition, in September 2025, the last PLP administration launched CAPAS the Creative and Performing Arts School of The Bahamas.

Forty-eight students and 14 members of staff began a 1-year Foundation program of training in the performing

arts, including acting for stage and screen, dancing and singing.

In December, the country had a first glimpse of their work in their '48-hour Film Challenge'.

But it was at their official opening showcase at the end of January 2026, after 9 weeks of training, that showed the world-class professional standard which CAPAS had already achieved.

In March 2026, this Honorable Parliament passed unanimously and unamended, the 'Creative and Performing Arts School of The Bahamas Bill'. On the Assent of Her Excellency the Governor-General, this legislation enshrined CAPAS as a national statutory

institution, to exist in perpetuity to act as a training hub for our new creative economy.

Madam Speaker,

Even in the glow of these major accomplishments over the course of just 10 months, as they prepare for the graduation of the first cohort in the Foundation Year at the end of this month, significant plans are in place for the next fiscal year.

It is intended that refurbishment of the main building on the CAPAS site, the former 'Phil's Supermarket' on Gladstone Road, will be completed within the next 6 months. Provision is made in the capital budget for the refurbishment.

CAPAS will expand its offering into the creative and production arts by launching filmmaking courses in writing and directing, along with training in hair and make-up, lighting, stage construction and other skills.

Even though CAPAS is still in its infancy, still at start-up stage, they have already been approached by international institutions to explore potential partnerships.

This is testimony to the reputation they have already established.

I am advised that they will also be starting community courses for members of the public.

Those in this chamber who wish to improve their performance skills may wish to enroll.

## **PARTNERSHIP**

Before I close, I want to renew my call for partnership.

I wish to challenge the thousands graduates and alumni of public schools, the University of The Bahamas and BTVI to deepen their engagement with the institutions that helped shape their lives and careers.

Whether through mentorship, scholarships, internships, equipment donations, industry partnerships, endowments, or financial contributions, alumni have a critical role to play in ensuring these institutions continue to grow and excel. The strongest universities and technical institutes in the world are supported not only by governments, but by generations of graduates who recognize that their success is tied to the success of the institutions that prepared them.

If we are serious about building world-class institutions, then we must foster a national culture in which those who have benefited from higher education and technical training see themselves as partners in its continued advancement.

**We cannot just sit on the sidelines as arm-chair pundits. So today I call for Less Talk. More Business.**

The future of education is not solely the responsibility of the government; it is a shared national responsibility.

## **RETURN ON INVESTMENT**

I said at the beginning that I am a businessman and education is an investment.

If we are investing hundreds of millions of dollars in education, we must also measure the return on that investment. That's only fair.

Not only in dollars, but in employment, entrepreneurship and national development and the empowerment and prosperity of the students it produces.

The goal is to build a national framework that helps us answer the question: Are we preparing Bahamians for the opportunities that actually exist?

We will publish our Key Performance Indicators, our graduate-outcome data, as it becomes available, and a clear timeline for the reforms this Ministry undertakes.

Because progress that is measured and made public is the only kind the Bahamian people can hold us to.

## **FAMILY ISLANDS AND CAPITAL WORKS**

I also wish to speak directly to my ministry's role in Exuma and the Family Islands.

I am Deputy Prime Minister, and Minister of Education for the entire Bahamas – but I am also the Member of Parliament for Exuma and Ragged Island, and I commit to never forget the people who sent me here.

If we want strong Family Islands, we need strong Family Island schools.

That includes attention to projects, promised for decades such as the new primary school in George Town, works to revamp to L.N. Coakley High, my alma mater. We will address high school needs in San Salvador. Other Family Island investments will be prioritized as we also meet the

need of a new school in Southern New Providence. This is an aggressive agenda; however, we will be innovative in engaging Public Private Partnerships.

## **CLOSING – CALL TO ACTION**

Madam Speaker,

Every child, on every island, deserves access to quality education.

As I close, I return to where I began.

The first term was defined by recovery – of jobs, tourism, confidence and credibility.

This term must be defined by something even greater.

The development of our people.

The child entering grade one today will inherit the Bahamas of 2040.

What kind of Bahamas are we preparing that child for?

Are we preparing that child for dependency and patronage?

Or are we preparing that child for dignity, productivity and ownership?

I believe the answer begins in our classrooms.

Because every road we build, every airport we expand, every investment we attract, every economy we grow, ultimately depends on one thing: the quality of the people we produce. Balanced educated citizens with skill and integrity.

**In my last term, I had the privilege of selling the beauty of The Bahamas to the world.**

**In this second term, I have the greater privilege of helping realize the brilliance of the Bahamian people.**

Every road we pave and every resort we open is not complete until the Bahamian people can truly own it.

**Tourism pays the bills for today – but education is the country's currency for tomorrow.**

Madam Speaker, the era of Bahamian ownership begins in the classroom.

We are not only teaching students; we are building the architects of the new Bahamian economy.

So today, I say to teachers: we see you.

To parents: we need you.

To students: we believe in you.

To unions: we will work with you.

To the private sector: partner with us.

To the Bahamian people: hold us accountable.

And to every child in The Bahamas: this government's work is about you.

We are building on progress, investing in people, strengthening education, and preparing the next generation.

I repeat as I said before, I believe, with every fiber of my being, that education is the greatest public good any nation can provide.

There is no greater investment, no greater equalizer, no greater instrument of national development.

And this is why with God's help, disciplined leadership, and the collective will of the Bahamian people, we will build an education system worthy of the promise of every Bahamian child.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.