

**Statement to the Legislative Assembly
3rd Meeting 2010/2011**

**By the Honourable Rolston Anglin, JP
Minister of Education, Training and Employment**

New High School Modifications

January 12, 2011

Madam Speaker, since taking up my post, the new schools projects have taken an inordinate amount of my time, and the time of the Ministry staff. I have endeavoured to keep this Honourable House regularly updated on both the challenges we have encountered and the strategies we have employed to take these projects forward. We have strengthened the project management, managed Contractor claims and disputes and we remain fully committed to completing the projects in as cost effective and timely a manner as possible.

Today my focus is on informing this house about the significant design challenges we have encountered, and about the considerable value engineering and redesign that has been required to turn these challenges into learning opportunities for our students.

Madam Speaker, the previous government employed the services of numerous overseas consultants, at significant expense to the public purse, and their advice was taken to inform the designs of our schools. It is difficult to argue as to whether or not these 'experts' are right - for these are designers, such as Prakash Nair, who on his website proclaims himself as a "futurist". This government recognises that such 'futurists' occupy a convenient position – as we are all likely to be long dead, before he is likely proven wrong.

Nonetheless, for those of us living in the here and now, the concern has to be whether what we build enables our teachers to teach and our students to learn. Madam Speaker, when we sought the advice of our educators, our experts, both within the classroom and in administration, they expressed grave concerns over aspects of the design, and whether it was best suited to the needs of our students. The Chief Education Officer and her Senior Management Team at the Department of Education Services took no ownership or responsibility for the design and the attendant teaching and learning approach proposed (i.e. open space learning). In fact, we heard consistently that aspects of the design were maintained despite the concerns voiced to the Ministry and its consultants about their inappropriateness, and the challenges that were likely to be encountered by teachers and students.

Madam Speaker, it is no understatement to say that some aspects of the design of the new high schools defy logic and judgement. Here are some key aspects our educators urged us to take action on:

1. Science and Art were designed to be taught at the same time in a large open space. Madam Speaker, imagine two separate science classes being conducted simultaneously with an art lesson in a room with no dividers. This was the design for the teaching of Science and Art!

I am told that our educators were informed that this was the concept a Da Vinci area where the separate subject lines were merged, in an attempt to recreate 'renaissance learning'. To our collective knowledge nowhere else in the world teaches science and art in the same room at high school level, for the obvious reasons of noise infiltration and the products of science experiments interfering with neighbouring classes. Both Science and Art have changed significantly, I suggest, since the times of Leonardo Da Vinci.

2. Plans for the security of the school campuses fell below the present levels expected at our high schools. The plan for the perimeter was a 42" high picket fence around the three sides at the rear, with no enclosure at all at the front. The CCTV planned for did not cover the perimeter areas, but was mainly focused within campus buildings.
3. Important curriculum offerings and other important aspects of provision were not accommodated within this design, including:
 - o No real provision for the teaching of Home Economics, as a Life Skills and examination subject, despite a design for commercial kitchens at each site that cost around \$750,000 each.
 - o Insufficient Science space for the present number of classes
 - o There was also no provision for behaviour modification centres and excessive provision for administrative staff.

I am advised that the original design had students learning alongside professional caterers in the commercial kitchens, whilst providing meals for their peers. Think of the Health and Safety issues involved: Can you imagine 20 Year 7 students in a commercial kitchen, working under time pressure to prepare lunch? Apart from the safety aspects, it is difficult to envisage how the teaching of skills would have been accommodated within this scenario.

4. "Open learning" environments are a consistent feature of the design of these schools. In simple words, Madam Speaker, these are schools without classrooms, where different teachers and classes of students are in full view and hearing of one another, in large open spaces. Madam Speaker, this is where we started as a school system, in our Town Halls! It would seem that the design of these new schools has sought to, at great expense, to take us back to where we started. The schools, and academies in particular are designed for independent working and small (4-6 students) group instruction within these open learning spaces. This is not the predominant method of learning in our High Schools at present, nor is

it likely to become so in the near future. Madam Speaker, one has to ask: who were these schools designed for? There seems to have been no consideration for the very real challenges such a structure poses to effective teaching, classroom management and student focus, and the realities of preparing students for external examinations.

Madam Speaker, it must also be recognized that independent working and small group instruction as methods of learning are not universally agreed on as best practice for all students or subjects at all times. Frequently whole group instruction and indeed discussion is required in order to produce the greatest learning impact! Furthermore, the professional development needed to assist staff to teach effectively in an Open Learning environment would be significant and expensive, given the current state of play within our education system.

Madam Speaker, as Minister I recognise that care needs to be taken that staff, students and parents do not become, or remain, negatively inclined toward the new buildings, as this will likely undermine the learning environment at the new high schools. Nonetheless, the public have a right to know that despite the significant expense incurred to the country, significant challenges were encountered with the original design.

Madam Speaker, in order to address the concerns of our highly respected educators, who know and understand the needs of Caymanian students, my Ministry has carried out significant value engineering and redesign, to turn these challenges into learning opportunities for all our students.

The redesign work completed to date is as follows:

1. Madam Speaker, the Laboratories will now be specifically given over to teaching science. These large laboratories will have to serve at least two classes simultaneously. There was no cost effective way of dividing them due to the ceiling height – but at least now art lessons will not be distracted by smoke billowing over from burning chemicals, or by the aroma of burning sulphur. Art has been re-housed in separate, facilities within the Design and Technology building. This further enables 3-D art and design by offering easy access to the equipment within the technology workshops.
2. Another important aspect of re-design, Madam Speaker, involved ensuring a more secure and safe learning environment for our students and staff. The 42” picket perimeter fence will

be replaced with 6ft chain link, and CCTV will be focused at the front of the building where the fence may not extend. I recognize this affects the aesthetics of the design, but when, as occurred recently at a private school on this island, a paedophile can openly approach students, even with fences and security guards present, how could we possibly leave the perimeters of our schools so unsecured and compromise our children? That “open space”, “everything goes” type of philosophy is behind us, hopefully forever.

3. World-class facilities for the teaching of Home Economics and Textiles are now provided, whereby whole classes can learn important skills from trained teachers, as well as access to a demonstration and commercial kitchen that can be utilised for vocationally-focused classes. These changes honour the UDP manifesto commitment to enhanced vocational education opportunities for our students.

Whilst we are on the subject of cooking and eating, I was also informed recently that one of the concepts suggested by Prof. Heppell and Co. was that students would “graze”. I was led to believe that this concept might enable students to go at any time to a canteen area to gain sustenance.

Madam Speaker, I suggest to you that if this incredible idea were actually true, many growing adolescents would never be in class to benefit from quality teaching and learning, but instead would graze most of the day! Imagine the discipline and control issues this would add to an already challenging environment! We are talking about 10-16 year old students, not grown adults! That fact seemed to be lost on the previous administration!!

I personally found this concept hard to believe, but there may be some grain of truth in it because there is no indoor eating space large enough to comfortably hold more than 40 students in the academies, so I am left to wonder if there was ever a vision for canteen style food provision. In the new schools students will be required to eat outside in covered areas during clear days and within their classrooms on particularly inclement days.

Madam Speaker, the re-design work has allowed us to provide for behaviour intervention areas, enhancing the new National Behaviour and Discipline strategy, which is significantly reducing serious incidents, and the need to suspend students in our schools. My ministry has introduced new policies for behaviour and discipline (I say new, but there was no pre-existing policy – and in fact almost no formal written and communicated policies of any type existed

at all when we took office). This policy, and the use of behaviour units that it requires, has reduced suspensions and incidences of serious indiscipline across our system by over 60%. In real terms this means by the end of October, 8 students were suspended in 2010 from Year 10 through 12, compared to 35 in 2009, and 51 in 2008. This is not schools going soft on discipline, but a focus on de-escalation, keeping the students in school rather than excluding them from all learning environments. In this way we are in fact equipping our teachers with strategies to assist our challenging students, while providing the students themselves with every opportunity to succeed.

Madam Speaker, The space for these units was created by using some of the administrative allocation. 16 central office staff were catered for in the original design, SIXTEEN!! CHHS has between 5 and 8 at present. Aside from the space one is left to wonder at the staffing costs required for these original designs.

4. Madam Speaker, this brings me to my biggest remaining regret regarding the limitations we encountered in our redesign work. The changes we have brought in will not enable my Ministry to deliver completely acoustically separate learning spaces within the academies – but we have added as close to them as we can.

We are constrained from adding ‘proper’ walls by the fire codes, which require a 4 ft gap for emergency egress at the end of each partition, and by MEP issues concerning air circulation, requiring the need to leave a gap at the top too! Please note that the majority of these buildings, with their MEP specifications, were substantially complete when I took office. This meant I had no opportunity to make more significant changes that I desired.

Obviously the costs of redesigning and rebuilding are too significant to redress this in a manner the government, parents, teachers and students desire, but we have done our best.

Permanent acoustic partitions have been added. An acousticians report was commissioned to confirm anticipated sound reduction levels. These have indicated that “Activities on one side of the fixed barriers will be audibly noticeable but not distracting most of the time, but with the potential for distraction in some cases.” We can only imagine what the learning environment would have been like with completely open spaces.

Madam Speaker, in keeping with my ongoing commitment to consultation, my ministry and I have taken these design changes back to educators, parents and students. Staff and some parents have been able to tour the new CHHS campus to assess the impact the changes, as well as being able to view the plans.

Madam Speaker, these changes have been met with significant support from those consulted. There is a tangible relief that they will not be made to conform to a futuristic experiment where the form of these buildings wholly dictated its function. Whilst reservations undoubtedly still remain in the minds of some regarding the design, more stakeholders are embracing the move as a positive one.

Madam Speaker, given the enormous burden that the building of these schools has placed on this, and possibly future generations, anything short of embracing the new schools as beneficial to learning would be a national tragedy. We all need to commit to ensuring that these schools open soon, and serve our children in a positive manner, rather than delivering the negative outcomes that would undoubtedly have take place under the previous administration. We, in this ministry, recognize that the buildings alone do not raise educational achievement and it is for this reason we have relied on the teachers, students and parents to guide us in making these most welcome modifications.

Madam Speaker, I thank you.