



*Government of Bermuda*

**Ministerial Statement**

To The House of Assembly

By

**Dr. The Hon. E. Grant Gibbons, MP, JP**

Minister of Education and Economic Development

**Middle School Transformation**

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**Mr. Speaker,**

The highest priority of the Ministry and Department of Education is to raise achievement and learning outcomes for all students in the Bermuda Public School System. And nowhere in our education system, are the concerns of parents, educators and the larger community, greater, than at the middle school level.

**Mr. Speaker,**

During the 2013/2014 school year, the Department of Education undertook an ambitious plan to audit all schools in the public system. However, after careful listening to concerned voices, a decision was taken to begin the audit process with our five middle schools.

There were three primary goals for conducting the audits:

- i. To provide middle schools and the Department of Education with an intensive, multi-faceted analysis of student learning, teaching and leadership in order to improve student outcomes;

- ii. To build first-hand a collective understanding of the strengths and challenges faced at schools; and,
- iii. To provide direction for the Department of Education's system support services needed to: improve teaching and learning outcomes, grow leadership capacity, improve the school climate, and engender community support.

**Mr. Speaker,**

In short, the middle school audits were designed to obtain a comprehensive analysis of the state of instruction and learning. This was necessary in order to facilitate targeted direction for both the Department of Education and middle school leaders for the improvement of student learning outcomes.

**Mr. Speaker,**

There was a promise made during the past school year to address concerns about middle school education. Today I am pleased to share a plan that does this, but first let me share with Honourable colleagues a backdrop of the best practice used to undertake the audit process. The audits were modeled after leading research that specifies what determines successful middle schools. This research was conducted by the Association of Middle Level Education, or AMLE. The AMLE holds at its core, a belief that "educational programmes for young adolescents should reflect what research and vast experience have demonstrated to be best" for children of middle school age.

Based on research and best practice, AMLE has developed 16 key characteristics of successful middle schools. They are grouped in three broad areas:

1. Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment;
2. Leadership and Organization; and,
3. Community and Culture

The performance of our middle schools were measured in these three broad areas to determine the extent to which the 16 characteristics were present in our middle schools.

**Mr. Speaker,**

Three audit teams were tasked with examining each of the five middle schools in each of the three areas. Each audit was unannounced and conducted over several days. Teams observed classroom instruction, conducted interviews of parents, teachers and school leadership. The teams also looked at pass/fail grades reported by schools in the first quarter of the school year. Overall, dozens of interviews were held, and more than 100 observations of classroom instruction were completed.

**Mr. Speaker,**

To put this in perspective, approximately the same number of observations were held during the audits of five middle schools as were held during the Bermuda Review of Education 2007, also referred to as the Hopkins Report.

**Mr. Speaker,**

The audit process was rigorous. Each middle school was rated on each of the 16 characteristics of successful middle schools using a range from one (1) to seven (7). A rating of one (1) reflected little to no evidence of the success characteristics while a rating of seven (7) reflected a high presence of success characteristics.

Overall, the results of the audits revealed that generally middle schools show little evidence of the success characteristics in the area of Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment and little evidence of the success characteristics in Leadership and Organization. However, there was moderate evidence of the success characteristics in the area of Community and Culture where there was a sense of support and advocacy for students and most schools were viewed as safe places with a sense of family and community. There was also a recognizable presence of community partners in schools that helped support meeting student social and behaviour needs.

**Mr. Speaker,**

Let me now share with the Honourable House summary highlights of audit findings:

- An absence of a clear vision for middle schools;
- No evidence of proven intervention programs to close learning gaps;
- A lack of active student-centered learning;
- Significant percentages of students reported failing in key subject areas within the first quarter of school;
- Inconsistent quality of leadership across schools;
- Little evidence of focused professional training;
- A need for strategic leadership and collaboration around school improvement;
- Heavy reliance on the practice of tracking, or ability-grouping of students;
- Physical environment concerns around aging buildings and state of disrepair; and,
- A need for comprehensive behaviour intervention and conflict resolution.

The summary results of the audits were shared with middle school principals, wider school leadership teams, and teaching staff. The majority have embraced the audit results as a start for greater improvement. **Mr. Speaker**, I believe that just as our parents want the best for their children, our educators also want the same, and are committed to do what is needed to deliver on improved student learning and achievement.

The results have also been shared with the majority of the middle school PTA executives. An overall summary report has been produced and includes the aggregated results for all of the middle schools. This will be placed on the Ministry's website.

**Mr. Speaker,**

It is quite evident that there is much work needed in our middle schools. However, now that we have sound factual data about the educational and social state of our middle schools, we can use this to drive targeted change in the Bermuda Public School System. The audit results are not about a single middle school, but the results reflect deficiencies that are systemic in nature; and, **Mr. Speaker**, systemic problems require systemic solutions. In this regard, the findings of the audits were used to design and develop a 10-point Middle School Transformation Plan to address the deficiencies found.

**Mr. Speaker,**

I will now provide my Honourable colleagues in the House with some detail of what the 10-point Middle School Transformation Plan entails. This Plan is comprehensive and reflects consultation, dialogue and collaboration with the school Principals.

The Transformation Plan comprises 10 high-impact actions that will be implemented during the 2014/2015 school academic year to improve overall student learning and teaching over the next three years. These actions are directly aligned with the 16 characteristics of successful middle schools. As we know, the Department of Education is responsible for giving schools support, providing professional development for instructional leaders, and carrying out appropriate supervision of principals. However, it is important to understand that the execution of the Plan will involve a collaborative effort. Each school principal and their leadership teams will be responsible to ensure that the transformation occurs at their respective school site.

**Mr. Speaker,**

So what are the 10 high-impact Actions?

**Action I: Develop a 21<sup>st</sup> century vision for middle school education.**

The audits revealed the need for a clear, new powerful vision for Bermuda's middle schools. This vision must empower young adolescents to experience an education that allows them to engage the world in challenging and relevant ways. In successful middle schools, a shared vision guides every decision around teaching and learning.

We will develop a 21<sup>st</sup> century vision for our middle schools so that there is a consistent vision for five schools, with the goal of one outcome; and that is student success. Each middle school will continue to have its own vision, unique to its school community, but consistent with the larger middle school vision focused on school improvement.

**Action II: Provide school leadership teams with specific training to lead school Improvement.**

A key focus for leaders of successful middle schools is ensuring that high quality instruction is the priority of school improvement. School leaders must shift more intently to the work of leading instruction by emphasizing best practice instructional strategies, monitoring, coaching and ensuring that effective teaching happens in every classroom, every day. The Department of Education will provide school leadership teams with targeted training in this area. This training has already started.

**Mr. Speaker,**

You may recall that on May 16<sup>th</sup>, I informed the Honourable House that 20 of our middle school leaders were engaged in a four day practical training programme entitled ‘Leading for Change in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century’. Subsequent to this training, each principal was challenged to develop a 30-day plan to implement a model in their school showing what an effective leadership team looked like. Now that this training has been given, in September 2014, higher standards of school leadership will be established for principals and leadership teams - and this will ultimately improve classroom instruction.

**Action III: Utilise a common bell schedule with standard times and opportunities for student learning, intervention, teaming and advocacy.**

**Mr. Speaker,**

In order to improve student learning, beginning in September middle schools will use a common bell schedule. This simply means that each school commits the same amount of time to instruction, intervention, and career and personal development. This will ensure that all students regardless of school location will

receive the same educational opportunities. All students will also have built-in school time for enrichment and to catch up if needed.

**Action IV: Implement a structure for the delivery of high quality lessons across all schools and subjects.**

The quality of instruction is the single most important factor in improving student achievement. The audits revealed a need to drastically change the way in which we engage children in classrooms, from teacher-centered and teacher-directed, to environments where student are challenged, engaged, and can take ownership for learning and success. To realize this vision, all middle school classrooms will receive specific, guidance for the quality of planning, instruction and engagement for lessons every day.

Middle schools will implement a best practice framework of instruction for all teachers by December 2014 that will focus directly on the quality of planning, instruction and student engagement. Principals will use the framework to improve teaching effectiveness.

**Action V: Eliminate ability-tracking to ensure that all students have access to high quality learning experiences.**

The Department of Education has communicated expectations to all school leaders to ensure that every classroom caters to the range of student abilities. Therefore, the Department will establish a standard that will ensure that students of all abilities will have access to high quality learning experiences. Therefore, the age old practice of tracking, or the separation of children into individual classes based on the perceived or measured ability, will end. Much research has been conducted on the negative effects of segregating students in this way on student achievement,



identity and success. According to global research, students in lower groups typically experience "fewer intellectual challenges, less engaging and supportive classrooms, and fewer well-trained teachers".

**Mr. Speaker,**

I have five more Action Points to share for the Transformation Plan.

**Action VI: Provide focused professional development on creating active, rigorous and engaged learning experiences to all teachers and leaders.**

Commencing during the fall school term, middle schools will implement a comprehensive professional development program for teachers. A 21<sup>st</sup> century vision of the Bermudian classroom requires teachers to be dynamic facilitators of rigorous, student-centered activities. By focusing professional development around the use of rigour in the classroom, teachers will be able to create experiences that challenge students as leaders, critical thinkers and problem solvers.

Principals will monitor, coach and provide feedback to teachers who will ensure active learning, engagement and rigour for students.

**Action VII: Ensure all students have academic interventions if they fail classes within the first quarter.**

The most proactive approach to student success is to ensure that all children experience high quality teaching, every day. However, some students will require additional support beyond classroom instruction in order to close academic gaps. Needed intervention must happen early. Therefore proven interventions which can close the gaps that emerge as students struggle, will be implemented throughout middle school. The Department of Education, for the first time since the

implementation of middle schools, will ensure that all students with academic gaps are supported through intervention programs which focus on strategies and address academic areas of need.

**Action VIII: Establish a mandatory standard which clearly defines readiness for transition into and out of middle school.**

We will ensure that the majority of students enter middle school reading on grade level and are proficient in mathematics, science and social studies. Students who enter middle school underprepared will receive additional mandatory support by way of interventions so they can also be properly prepared to exit the middle school level three years later. With the input of school stakeholders, we will establish a clear standard that sets out the expectations for academic readiness, growth from year to year, and support needed for each child.

**Action IX: Establish comprehensive behaviour intervention programs in every middle school.**

Schools must be safe, inclusive, and supportive of all students. In September this year, the Department of Education will begin the implementation of a system-wide behavioural model, Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports or PBIS. PBIS encourages a school-wide positive culture and specific interventions to increase positive behavior. Consistent school-wide actions and expectations will decrease negative behavior and build a foundation for positive relationships and interactions amongst students and staff. Each school will develop a comprehensive behaviour management programme to manage discipline based on school-wide positive behavior strategies.

Lastly, **Mr. Speaker,**

**Action X: Raise the qualifications standard for all middle grades teachers within three years.**

To ensure that teachers and leaders possess the capacity to lead students toward greater achievement and success, the Department of Education will raise the standard of teaching for all middle school teachers. In the first phase, higher standards will be set for new teachers of English, Mathematics and Science. These standards have been approved by the Board of Education to guide the recruitment and professional development of teachers. The new qualifications standards require increased knowledge of content and instruction necessary to promote 21<sup>st</sup> century learning experiences. The Department will develop a plan to increase the content and instructional competency of all teachers to meet the new qualifications goals within three years.

**Mr. Speaker,**

Let me summarize at this point. The Middle School Transformation Plan sets out a series of 10 Action Points as first steps needed to transform the learning outcomes of students in the Bermuda Public School System. The Plan represents the most focused, intentional support for improving student learning and outcomes since the launch of middle schools.

This Transformation Plan also represents a multi-year commitment. It is one that will require the active participation and sustained focus of all school leaders, all Department personnel, parental support and support from the community at large. I have noted the roles and responsibilities of the Department of Education, the middle school principals, their leadership teams, and other middle school educators to effectively work together and implement the Middle School Transformation Plan. I certainly invite our parents to participate in making this Middle School

Transformation Plan a success by reviewing the summary findings of the audit which will be made available on the Ministry website; and, by continuing to engage their children's middle school teachers, leadership teams and principals during the implementation and monitoring of the Plan.

During the next school year, parents will be regularly updated on the progress of the Plan. Their questions, concerns and support will help to ensure that middle schools and the Department are held accountable for carrying out their assigned roles and responsibilities to make this Plan a success. Our students are our most precious resource and therefore the Bermuda Public School System is very intentional about its focus - to ensure that all children receive a first class education based on global standards where they can reach their highest potential.

**Mr. Speaker**

In closing, I would like to express my sincere appreciation to principals, teachers, students, staff at the Department of Education, parents and the greater community who have continued to press for improvements in our schools. Their input was the driving force behind the audits and their active participation will be critical in the year ahead.

**Thank you Mr. Speaker**