

Headmaster, Mr. Imran Ally, Deputy Headteacher, Senior teachers, teachers, members of the PTA, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, and especially students, I should like to thank all of you for inviting me to be part of this important event—Lower Corentyne Secondary School's Prize-Giving Ceremony. It is a great honor to be here with you.

A few short months ago, I embarked on a project which involved going to each and every secondary school in Berbice. This was a difficult but enlightening experience. It was difficult because the schools were many and stretched from Skeldon in the east to Abary in the west; because the schedule was grueling, and the task of running the University of Guyana Berbice Campus still had to be done. Only one or two schools were equipped or bothered to set up a public address system. The experience was enlightening because I saw first-hand the conditions under which teaching and learning were being done in the secondary schools of Berbice. To be sure, the conditions varied dramatically from school to school.

I saw schools in which students were wonderfully disciplined and attentive, then there were others where there was confusion and chaos. There were schools where students already seemed to have lost hope and others where hope shone bright in young eyes, bright as morning light. There were schools in which teachers were clearly interested in the welfare of their students and then other schools where teachers appeared uninterested and unmotivated. And there was clearly a distinct difference in the level of commitment from head teachers and deputies. Some head teachers did not even bother to turn up or to apologize for not being able to be present, those for whom simple politeness was a trial. But then there were those schools where the head teachers were there, prepared, had their students organized, had their auditoriums set up, and their teachers in attendance. Those head teachers were interested not only in what their students and teachers were doing but also interested in what they could be doing, in their futures.

There were other things that I was careful to observe, including infrastructure management, physical organization, staff room layouts, the state of classrooms, the number of working computers, and library facilities. But for me, it was not

enough to observe that there were no computers or that what computers that were there were not in working order. This was not enough, so I began to ask for computers from Turkeyen—they had 23 that were not being used and could no longer be used. I got ten and distributed them to the most needy schools with compliments from UGBC. I dispatched my computer technicians to schools to service schools' computers. I bought volumes of Journals and distributed them to schools that offered English B or literature. We have initiated projects whereby we can generate money to offer scholarships to bright needy Berbician students, especially those interested in agriculture. UGBC **cannot** and **will** not work alone: it works **with** the community for the community; it works **because** of the community. This is a new vision for UGBC, and believe it or not, there are people who think that these are bad ideas. But how can an idea be bad if it benefits the children of Berbice? How can planting a tree be a bad idea when our children will reap the fruits of that tree?

In addition to visiting schools and listening to those that inhabit schools, I have busied myself with listening to people from all walks of life in Berbice and beyond. I have talked to businessmen, chambers of commerce, members of the police force, including the ranks and the leading officers, with small shop owners and market venders, with groundsmen and taximen, with farmers and clerks, with people from various governmental and non-governmental organizations, and with high school students, university lecturers, and high school teachers. And, as you all would know, the complaints come in an avalanche. But there is almost always an absence of suggested solutions. The talk becomes little more than gossip, little more than the babble of men who have had too much to drink. There is much to complain about, but I would like to emphasize to you that merely complaining is the lowest form of critical thought.

But let me return to this informal assessment of what prevails in schools such as yours. I need to tell you that one of the best run schools that I have visited is Lower Corentyne Secondary School. It was clear that the school was organized, the surroundings clean, the classrooms well structured, the teachers diligent, the HM in attendance and attentive, the students interested and disciplined. Indeed, if I had a school-aged child, this school would be one that I would consider first for

that child. One of the things that set this school apart from others was that the head teacher of this school had a vision for the future of the school. To have vision, one has to have imagination—one has to see in one's own mind how we can develop things from what they are to what they could be.

One of the problems facing Guyana and the West Indies on the whole, and education in particular, is that there seems to be a failure of the imagination. We insist on doing things in the identical manner in which we have done things for centuries. We act the same way, say the same things in the same ways, think the same thoughts, hold stubbornly to the same habits, and react in the same old ways. We seldom look for different and more efficient ways to get things done. You, the young, should not and cannot afford to be like that. You need to envision the future, to think deeply and scientifically, to gather up in your minds the things that have been done well elsewhere in the world. And then you build on this. You need to be creative and inventive, enterprising and adventurous. These are the stuff that builds the highway called excellence.

Excellence is not word that many people understand well. We use words like "excellence", "brilliant", "genius", "extraordinary", "the best in the world", and so on with great frequency. These are called superlatives, and they ought to be used with extreme care. If you look at the newspapers, you will see these words used quite often. Do not fall into this trap. Those words should be used to describe people and actions that are indeed brilliant, excellent, and so on. And throughout history, there have only been a small number of human beings that could be described by those words.

Words are important, and language is one of the few things that separates us from the other animals. People often say that we should not be judged by our words but by our actions. That is true on a certain level; however, how we act and what we do is often reflected in the manner in which we speak and write. It is most unlikely that a man who uses curse words in loud and aggressive ways would suddenly take action that is for the good of people.

If you speak well, it is most likely that you will write well, and if you speak and write well you will act nobly. By good speech, I do not only mean things like

grammar, but what words we choose, the order in which we arrange those words, the volume in which you speak, the tone and mood in which you speak. There are those of us who think that if someone speaks loudly, then that person is “powerful”. But truly powerful people speak quite softly, and demonstrate refinement in their speech. **What** you say is important, but **how** you say it is just as important.

The excellence that I witnessed in this school, in your school, is what we are here to acknowledge and celebrate. Those of you who are being granted prizes are examples of what could be achieved if the effort is made—the effort made by your HM and teachers, by your parents, and by yourselves. For make no mistakes about it: your accomplishments today are yours to a great extent; but it is also the result of the collective effort of your head teacher, your teachers, and your families.

In winning prizes for various accomplishments, you have proven that you have excelled in particular areas of learning. You have shown excellence, and for that you should be rewarded and praised. For that, you should be proud. Your families and teachers should be proud. Let what you have accomplished thus far be a stepping stone for bigger and better accomplishments. I hope that I will see many of you at the University of Guyana Berbice Campus as members of our family at UGBC. Continue to strive, continue to achieve, walk tall and walk proud as Berbicians and as Guyanese. Continue to quest for excellence as the men and women of tomorrow.