



BERMUDA
EDUCATION
NETWORK

PARISH SCHOOL SUBMISSION

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Executive Summary

All of Bermuda's students deserve to succeed and changes at all levels of the system are urgently needed to ensure this. At the primary level, over 50 per cent of students are struggling with reading, and Bermuda Education Network (BEN) and its members estimate that at least 25 per cent of students have attention issues. Principals and teachers know that many students are not receiving the specialist services they need, but their appeals for more resources are often denied by the Department of Education.

The most common reason given for services not being available in the public schools is "lack of funding." If there is insufficient funding for interventions that address executive function and language deficits, it is our opinion that the government cannot afford to waste funds on building renovations. We agree that some school consolidation is unavoidable to reduce costs of maintenance and to create staffing efficiencies, but rather than closing nine schools to form ten Parish Schools with 300 students, we are proposing a more sensible approach that is to close schools with low student enrolment only and to limit the costs of new buildings.

50%

OF PRIMARY STUDENTS
STRUGGLE WITH READING

- We oppose the plan to create an Alternative School at Elliott
- We oppose the closure of St. David's Primary and St. George's Prep.
- We propose to close 5 schools so that 14 primary schools remain open
- 10 of these would have 200 students (two streams) and 4 would be smaller and specialist
- We support the plan to move Hope Academy to a renovated site at Prospect Primary
- We suggest a thorough review of key-player departments.

25%

OF STUDENTS HAVE
ATTENTION ISSUES

We believe that it should be possible to implement these changes relatively rapidly while ensuring that enough public funds are available to implement a thorough overhaul of early intervention programs. This alternative proposal eliminates the need for renovations at Harrington Sound, Gilbert Institute, West Pembroke, and Purvis and comes at substantially less cost to the public purse. There are numerous other considerations, which we have included in our response to the specific Parish School proposals.

Projected Student Numbers

School	Number of students 2021	Number of students 2022	Extra classrooms needed ?
Dalton E Tucker	100	200	Yes
East End	77	75	No
Elliott	121	200	Yes
Francis Patton	125	200	Yes
Gilbert Institute	107	75	No
Harrington Sound	215	200	No
Paget Primary	137	200	Yes
Purvis	166	200	No
Somerset Primary	101	200	Yes
St. David's	73	100	No
St. George's Prep	108	200	Yes
Victor Scott	144	200	Yes
West Pembroke	204	200	No

Bermuda Education Network

Since our establishment in 2011, BEN's network of business and community supporters has supported thousands of students and hundreds of privately funded projects and programs in public schools.

Our mission is to be an ally in improving public education through opportunities that empower teachers. For our response to the Parish School proposals we have drawn on the expertise of members who include:

- Special Education and learning difference experts
- Field educators and content specialists
- Psychologists and guidance counsellors
- Project Management professionals
- Construction companies
- Business leaders including insurers, lawyers and accountants
- Public school parents
- Public and private school teachers
- Public and private school leaders



While our members have strong reservations about the Parish School proposals, they are supportive of the overall goal to deliver customized learning experiences for students and to improve family and community engagement. Several of our members serve on the Learning First initiative and BEN's board was actively involved in the previous Plan 2022 Consultation. There is strong desire and commitment amongst our members for public education reform and underlying this is our belief that stronger communities build stronger schools.

BEN provides experiential learning programs to 14 public primary schools and we have regular contact with principals, parents and teachers. Our goal is to combine action with advocacy in order to promote change. In 2017 we distributed stationery vouchers to every public school teacher while calling for more classroom supplies, in 2019 we organized Bermuda's first Wellness Retreat for teachers while warning that teachers are increasingly at risk of burnout. Our advocacy has included an active role in the 2019 consultation for Plan 2022 in which we urged more opportunities for teacher professional development. BEN's Organise Teach Connect program currently provides support for school improvement plans and teacher professional development.

The school reforms present an opportunity to recruit world leaders in special education, and to bring Bermuda's intervention systems up-to-date with recent developments in the fields of neurology, psychology, child development and learning differences.

The need for better early intervention and “wrap around” services.

Student needs have increased primarily due to changing demographics. Twenty years ago an average classroom of sixteen students had students who were struggling with reading or behavioral challenges, but the majority were ready to learn. At that time, a few schools had a higher proportion of students from a low-income background, many of which needed learning support.

Now, in all public primary classrooms about half the students need additional support of some kind. The Parish School Proposal will not solve these issues. There is no evidence that new curricula helps students with undiagnosed learning differences or that new buildings turn disruptive students into high performers. Prioritising building renovations for education improvement is like wasting resources on new hardware for an IT system that suffers from a software issue.

The proposal makes reference to improved “wrap around” services but does not provide details of what the increased services will be. Currently, the crucial work of providing interventions to students with learning differences and behavioral issues is delivered by a department that is poorly led and inefficient. The Student Services department has a budget of over \$20 million and is not held accountable for the delivery of assessments, adequate interventions and ongoing support. In our opinion, this department needs a thorough review.

Our members include Special Education experts with experience of both Bermuda’s private and public school sectors. They have identified several major issues.

The Health Department provides therapy from speech language pathologists, physical therapists, and occupational therapists, shared among the schools.

- Schools complain of lengthy delays
- Children are released from services too early
- Inconsistent delivery of services being provided to children due to inadequate communication from the Department of Health.
- Many children who qualify for services cannot receive the intervention they need, due to the lack of therapists
- Those who are receiving services do not have enough to be fully effective.

We need an intervention program in place that begins at the start of school and finishes at the end of the school year, using July and August for assessment and follow-up with parents on progress. The school reforms present an opportunity to recruit world leaders in special education, and to bring Bermuda's intervention systems up to date with recent developments in the fields of neurology, psychology, child development and learning differences. Funds should be conserved to hire the expertise needed to review and design effective "wrap around" services.



Reading Interventions

The Parish School proposal does not include any special measures to improve reading outcomes, but weak reading results are arguably the most serious failing of the public schools. Sixty per cent of public primary students are not reading on grade level.

BEN's members include experienced reading specialists, some of whom have worked in the public primary school system. We are deeply concerned that funds needed for training teachers how to teach students to read and assessments and interventions (that are urgently needed for struggling readers) will be diverted to non-essential building renovations under these proposals.

Literacy experts agree that ninety per cent of children are capable of learning to read fluently by P4 and this needs to be the highest priority of primary schools along with supporting students with acquiring the mindset to be a learner.

We are aware that current initiatives include the introduction of Heggerty for Phonemic and phonological awareness in P1 and the Gates-MacGinitie assessments, Beginning Reading Level, with Sub-Tests in Initial Consonants and Clusters, Final Consonants and Clusters, Vowels, and Basic Story Words (sight words).

We've uncovered a gap in The Parish School proposal, which does not include how the above initiatives will be delivered to ensure that all primary teachers are trained to recognize why emerging readers are struggling and effective ways to support them.

The Cambridge checkpoint tests provide diagnostic data that helps the Department of Education (DoE) and principals to identify areas for improvement. Anecdotally, we understand from our teacher colleagues that teachers need to use more explicit teaching of phonics, vocabulary, word study and inference.

Measures to improve reading outcomes have been neglected in the Parish School proposal and have not been given adequate priority for several years. There has been a marked decline in the Department's expertise in reading since Darnell Wynn's departure in 2012. The Literacy Collaborative initiative was abandoned and a number of good recommendations included in the 2014 National Literacy Strategy have never been implemented. Perhaps one of the largest setbacks was the decision in June 2017 to make the content specialists redundant. We applaud the efforts of the current Acting Reading Officer but believe that a larger team including reading coaches is needed. The following are recommendations to improve the primary school reading program:

- Invite retired reading teachers to work part-time as reading teachers and identify who has reading expertise in Bermuda.
 - Update the content on the MOED website and include videos explaining the science of reading
 - Hire consultants or staff to work alongside classroom teachers as coaches and ensure they are implementing Heggerty and teaching phonics with integrity at lower primary and using guided reading effectively throughout the year groups.
 - Ensure that the reading assessments are being implemented with fidelity and that students who are not approaching expectations are referred rapidly for services.
 - Forge new connections with private school reading teachers and expand support provided by the Reading Clinic.
 - Research whether summer and after-school reading interventions could be organized to boost confidence of struggling readers.
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Objections to the proposals for St. George's

The transport connections between St. David's and St. George's are challenging and we believe that having a primary school is important to the St. David's community. The Parish Proposal concept of a community hub seems particularly needed in St. David's where the loss of the Black Horse and the supermarket have already eroded community.

We oppose the closure of St. David's Primary and St. George's Prep for four reasons:

1. We oppose the closure of St. David's Primary because it is a high performing school that serves its community well. The St. David's Primary School achieves good results for students but it is unlikely to attract enrollment over 100 students. While we recommend that most of the primary schools should have 200 students, we suggest that an exception should be made in St. David's where a small school is appropriate and needed.
 2. Likewise we oppose the closure of St. George's Prep because it is a high performing school that serves its community well. The concern that government should not pay for renovations buildings located on land which belongs to a trust are outweighed by a greater public interest – to keep a high performing school open. There is strong community support for returning SGPS to its previous size as a two stream school and increasing the numbers of students who can attend there.
 3. East End Primary should also remain open and its role serving students with learning differences should be developed.
 4. More generally, we reject the claim that old school buildings are incapable of supporting 21st century learning. With the exception of Somersfield Academy, all the private schools in Bermuda include old buildings which even without major renovations have been modified to support IT upgrades and new programs.
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Objections to the proposals for Paget

We oppose the closure of Gilbert Institute because it is in a central location which is close to the hospital and has the potential to serve students with special needs. We believe it should remain open and have smaller numbers of students (75) including those with hearing disabilities who it currently serves and potentially some students with physical disabilities in order to relieve the pressure on Hope Academy.

Comments on the proposals for Devonshire

While we agree that education is a priority area for investment, and we desire an equitable education system, the most serious examples of inequity relate to the failure to provide appropriate special needs education. We therefore support the plan to find a new location for Hope Academy. We feel that the choice of the current Prospect Primary site is sensible, but should be discussed with Hope Academy parents. In the meantime, we suggest that two small schools, Gilbert Institute and East End Primary who have each provided special needs programming in the past, might be refitted in order to accommodate some of the students from Hope Academy, temporarily reducing the problems at Hope Academy while the Prospect site is renovated.

We do not agree with the proposal to convert Elliott into an Alternative School for a number of reasons. The proposal refers to the Alternative School serving the two current “Success Academy” schools. Unfortunately the Success Academy pilot at Heron Bay does not appear to have been a success and unless a clear and detailed design for Success Academy is made public we cannot support this proposal. Moreover, we believe the combination of the two age groups is ill-advised. The idea to create a separate institution for students with social emotional needs due to trauma is troubling. If students are disruptive and cannot be managed in regular classes, there should be interventions, but these should be temporary and there should be a plan for reintegration into the mainstream classes once issues are resolved. Research shows that behavioral needs mainly arise due to learning differences and therefore if the wrap around services provided by Student Services are adequate and consistently implemented, there should be no need for an Alternative School.

Financial and budget considerations

Closures are intended to result in the elimination of costs of maintaining aging buildings but no information is included in these proposals about the current annual maintenance cost for the schools that are proposed to be closed.

Neither has a budget for the proposed renovation of the 10 Parish school buildings been revealed. The public has a right to demand fiscal responsibility and to have an opportunity to assess the cost/benefit of proposals which could cost anything from \$50 million to \$200 million.

If the budget is \$50 million, and the current proposals are to add classrooms and other facilities at 10 schools that would allow \$5 million per school.

Our members with construction expertise have estimated that the costs of renovating an average size primary school and adding several classrooms could be at least \$2million per school. An extensive renovation project to add design and technology labs, auditoriums and other facilities would be at least \$5million.

For example, the Innovation Centre at BHS costs were \$9 million for construction \$1 million for Design fees and \$1 million for Furniture Fittings and Equipment. Construction costs run between \$300/sq.ft and \$350/sq.ft for new school structures while renovations are likely to be approximately \$200 - \$250/sq.ft

Other Considerations

While current enrolment in primary schools is 2074, if primary schools add three more year groups K – P8, we will need to accommodate approximately 2650 students. For ten schools that means 265 students each. If there were 14 schools that would mean 190 students but we feel that a better proposal would be to have 4 small schools which include special education students and 10 schools that serve 200 students.

A reason was not provided why 300 students is seen to be the ideal number for Bermuda's primary schools although it is similar to the UK primary school average of 282 students. We know that the authors of the proposals have a vision for the schools to be community hubs. Over the past decade, BEN has been involved in three initiatives to build community amongst teachers, students, parents and extended family members and it has been our experience that the work of building community is extremely challenging.

One of the many factors that may need to be taken into account is whether creating large schools of 300 could have the unintentional effect of weakening social capital. The research on social capital includes the Dunbar number theory recently popularized by Malcolm Gladwell in "The Tipping Point".

Social anthropologist, Robert Dunbar, identified 150 as the maximum number for groups to feel like a community. But there are more immediate practical reasons why we reject the proposal to create 10 schools for 300 students.

In summary, the work to convert ten schools to be Parish schools for 300 students will be extremely costly and we believe that the benefits of these proposals could be more quickly and more cheaply achieved by having two stream schools of 200 students with much less disruption to students, parents and teachers.

We thank you for allowing us this opportunity to comment and if you wish to discuss our proposal further please email us at admin@ben.bm
