Speech by H.E. Mr Rajkeswur Purryag, GCSK, GOSK, President of the Republic of Mauritius, on the occasion of the Annual Prize Giving Ceremony of the John Kennedy College, held on Wednesday 18 June 2014, at 09.30 hrs.

The President and Members of the Parents-Teachers’ Association
Mr. Madoo Ramjee, Rector of the John Kennedy College
Members of the Teaching and Non-Teaching Staff
Dear Students
Distinguished Guests
Ladies and Gentlemen

Good morning!

I wish to thank you for having invited me to participate in your Annual Prize Giving Ceremony this year.

I feel deeply honoured to join you on this special occasion, particularly in an institution named after one of the most illustrious statesman that the world has ever produced.

I understand your College also celebrated its Golden Jubilee last year.

That was also an event that needed to be celebrated.

Because 50 years in the life of an educational institution is indeed a long period of time.

But as you have yourselves stated in the Souvenir Magazine launched on that occasion, you are not only history, you are also the present.

During these past 50 years, much water has flowed under the bridge of the John Kennedy College.

From a modest beginning in January 1965, the College has now a population of over 900 students with almost 66 Educators including supply teachers.

You must be proud that your college is classified as one of the best educational institution in Mauritius.

Your College is also actively engaged in a number of extra-curricular and sports activities.

I know for a fact that the John Kennedy College was the first College in Mauritius to introduce the teaching of technical subjects, i.e., woodwork and metalwork in its curriculum.
I am informed that the College is one of the most technically equipped educational institution in Mauritius.

All this go a long way to do justice to that great statesman that President John Kennedy was and all that he represented.

President John Kennedy as you know, had a great vision for education.

This is what he said once, and I quote:

“Let us think of education as the means of developing our greatest abilities, because in each of us there is a private hope and dream which, fulfilled, can be translated into benefit for everyone and greater strength for our nation.” (Unquote)

President John Kennedy had always believed that the progress of a nation could be no swifter than its progress in education.

Therefore, all of you, teachers and students as well as the non-teaching staff, have every reason to be proud to belong to a college that epitomises the ideals and vision of President John Kennedy.

At the same time, you should be inspired by the words of wisdom of President Kennedy, especially as you celebrate the performance of your best students.

This Prize Giving Ceremony is certainly an excellent initiative that should be commended.

Because it provides the ideal framework to stimulate and encourage the learning potential of our students, to elicit positive behaviour on their part and to enable them to achieve excellence in education.

I have noted that the pass rates at both School Certificate and Higher School Certificate examinations have improved, from 91.5% and 84.7% in 2011, to 98.5% and 91.5% respectively last year.

This, in my view, is sufficient indication that the John Kennedy College is now back on track and is gradually reconciling with its glorious days that constituted its pride in our education sector.

I also understand that some 11 HSC students did remarkably well in last year’s examination, four in the Economics side, and seven in the Technical side.

I congratulate all those who have excelled in their studies.

I should tell you that in the good old days, the John Kennedy College used to bag at least one Laureate on a regular basis.

I am told that the last time the College had a laureate was in 2005, almost 10 years ago.

The question that I should like to put is – What has gone wrong?
Why is it that the John Kennedy College is no longer being able to produce any laureate these days?

I am sure that the Rector who is himself an educationist of longstanding experience is already working together with his team, including the teachers on a series of measures to reverse that trend, which is a must.

That is because a good education is the foundation upon which we can build for a better and more innovative future.

Good education, a rounded education is indeed the base for everything, for prosperity, employment as well as sustained economic growth.

Therefore, one of the biggest challenges of our education system should be to help our children learn and fulfil the promise of their future.

Our schools can’t succeed unless they relentlessly focus on efficiency and results and help our children achieve their full learning potential.

At the same time, they should be groomed to unlock their capacity to lead their own lives instead of being led.

This means training our children to be independent, to be good followers and to tap into the promises that each one of them can bring to our society.

Excellent schools, and the John Kennedy College is certainly one of them, can and do rise even in the most grim conditions.

Teaching successfully, especially in challenging schools is an act of leadership by people passionately invested.

And I have no doubt that this College has on its roll many teachers who can be considered as “transformers of expectations” and who make a huge difference in the lives of our students.

Let me tell you however, that in all that we do, in any fields, discipline is the bridge between goals and accomplishment.

Discipline must be a habit so ingrained that it is stronger than the goals themselves.

Without discipline, there is no success.

Therefore, my message to you this morning is that you mobilise all your resources in a systematic and organised way to tackle the issues that confront you with strong determination, and more importantly, a system of discipline worthy of a nation.

Press reports abound with cases of physical aggression against teachers or between and among students themselves.

Even our girls have now joined the fray.
Recently, I read that girls were involved in a number of brawls after school hours at the bus terminal.

Students were also caught in private clubs, drinking binge during school hours.

All these are indications that something is fundamentally wrong in our education system.

Of course, I am aware that a lot of effort is being made to tackle the problem of behaviour as well as absenteeism in our schools, particularly, at the secondary level.

But no amount of effort will succeed if we do not tackle the root cause of the problem.

And that has to do with our values.

Education is first about values and then knowledge and skills.

On the other hand, the end and aim of all education is the development of character.

Values such as respect, courtesy and consideration are the very foundations of a good and civilised society, which includes respect for others and obeying the laws of the land.

For that matter, our teachers, indeed, all school staff deserve respect.

There can never be any justification for subjecting our teachers to assault, either verbal or physical.

I reprehend all forms of aggression against teachers.

And it is about time to restore respect for our teachers to its legitimate and rightful place.

This implies a sustained drive to strengthen school discipline.

We need to address the behaviour problems at an early stage, because if we don’t, then both the students themselves and society at large will suffer.

The consequences of behaviour are known to be very damaging.

You know, I have attended many similar Prize Giving Ceremonies since I become the President of the Republic.

I will be attending two more next week, namely at Cosmopolitan College, a private secondary school in the North, and the Royal College Curepipe.

I must admit that most students, the majority, attend school regularly and put up with the right behaviour and discipline.
They are hardworking, dedicated and committed to their studies.

There are however, a few, and we find them in almost all schools, who do not behave well and contribute to portray a bad image of their school.

These students must be given our full support and encouragement so that they can turn over a new leaf.

As a Chinese Philosopher has put it:

(Quote)

“The great virtue of man lies in his ability to correct his mistakes and continually to make a new man of himself.” (Unquote)

And it was Socrates who had said:

(Quote)

“The way to gain a good reputation is to endeavour to be what you desire to appear.” (Unquote)

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear Students

I am also tempted to quote what George Bernard Shaw had said:

(Quote)

“Better keep yourself clean and bright; you are the window through which you must see the World. Therefore to thy own self, be true, and you will succeed!” (Unquote)

Ladies and Gentlemen

Education is a partnership involving the school, the teachers as well as the parents.

All of them have a crucial role to play.

Our schools are places where the behaviour and future educational success of our children are shaped.

Teachers, on the other hand, have a big responsibility of moulding the character of our students, igniting their minds, and in making them enlightened citizens.

Therefore, the way students behave and act also depends on the teacher’s attitude.

A teacher carries enormous responsibilities in his classroom, and all students depend on him for he is a role model for them.
If the teacher creates the right environment in the classroom, the result will be reflected in the academic progress of the students.

That’s why teachers should be the best minds in our country and have the compassion and commitment for the education of our children.

Teachers are the very backbone of any country, the pillar upon which all aspirations are converted into realities.

As Dr. Abdul Kalam, a great scholar and former President of India has said:

(Quote)

“A good teacher with meticulous planning prepares himself for teaching and the student for acquisition of knowledge.” (Unquote)

So, as teachers, it is incumbent upon you to prepare our children to become lifelong autonomous learners.

I believe that there is no other profession in the world that is more noble to society than that of teacher.

Therefore, it’s about time that we empower you, teachers so you can deal with cases of indiscipline and recalcitrant students more effectively and without hindrance or fear.

But for that, you need character and leadership qualities.

Because a man’s character is the arbiter of his fortune.

Character is what is crucial for you to give back to our education system its letters patent of nobility.

On their part, parents must be aware of the need for a rounded education for their children and make sure that the old traditions and values are inculcated in them.

They should also set an example for their children by their own behaviour and conduct.

Parents must be aware that a good family environment is central to a child’s future.

Ladies and Gentlemen

The mission and prime objective of our education system should be to raise educational standards in our schools.

But we cannot raise standards if our students continue to behave badly, or for that matter, do not attend schools.
I would like to believe that regular attendance coupled with punctuality as well as good behaviour - indeed, the right behaviour and attitude are the necessary preconditions for effective learning and educational success.

Discipline and efficiency should continue to be part of the school’s culture and practices.

I have never believed those who advocate a soft approach to indiscipline.

I invite you to read the Centennial Magazine of the Royal College Curepipe published by the Old Royals and in which they depict the kind of discipline that existed in our colleges in their days.

Remember that discipline, in our days, even corporal punishment, did not do us any harm.

We succeeded because there was discipline, at home as well as at school.

As Mr Lee Kwan Yu, the former Prime Minister of Singapore once said and I quote –

“If we want high morale, we must have high standards. If we want high standards, then discipline must be enforced fairly and firmly.” (Unquote)

These are also words of wisdom that should inspire you all.

With these words, I would like to reiterate my thanks and appreciation to the Rector and his staff for their invitation this morning.

I wish you all well.

I wish the John Kennedy College well.

God Bless you!

I thank you for your attention.