Address by His Excellency Mr. Rajkeswur Purryag, GCSK, GOSK, President of the Republic of Mauritius, on the occasion of the World Teachers’ Day, organised by the Government Teachers’ Union at the Louis Eugene Fabien Teachers’ Centre, Quatre Bornes, on Saturday 04 October 2014, at 11 00 hrs

The Representative of the Ministry of Education and Human Resources
Mr Jugduth Seegum, President of the Government Teachers Union
Members of the Executive Committee of the Government Teachers’ Union
Dear Teachers
Distinguished Guests
Ladies and Gentlemen

This is for the third consecutive year that I have been invited by the Government Teachers’ Union to celebrate together with you the World Teachers’ Day.

I feel therefore deeply honoured and privileged to be in your midst this morning.

Let me, however, first of all, wish you all a very Happy Teachers’ Day.

You deserve this special day all to yourselves.

To-day, I wish to situate my address to you in a different context – the future socio-economic development of our country and the sustainability of our welfare state, and how closely linked are they to the education of our children.

Why am I saying that? Because the sustained socio-economic development of Mauritius will depend on how best we educate our children.

Our children are the pillars of our strengths and the beacon of our hope for the future, for a more prosperous to-morrow.

Our children will be the drivers of our economic growth.

They will have to work relentlessly to sustain our welfare state.

Let me give you some facts and figures:

- To-day, there are some 180,000 senior citizens. The pension bill is around Rs 8 billion annually.
- By the year 2050, the number of senior citizens will be approximately 350,000. And the pension bill will rise to around Rs 14 billion annually.
- There are at present 5 to 6 workers to support one senior citizen.
- By the year 2050, because of an ageing population, there will be only 2 to 3 workers to sustain one senior citizen.
Mauritius is therefore at a cross-roads.

Because for the last successive 45 years, it has ensured its development due to the successive Lomé Conventions and the EU sugar protocol.

All these instruments have helped us to move away from abject poverty to a middle income group country.

When we obtained our Independence, many people had predicted doomsday for our country.

But through education, we have succeeded.

In 1950, SSR had realised that education was the most powerful weapon to combat poverty and empower our youth.

When he became the Liaison Officer of education, his goal was to give universal access to primary education to each and every child of our country.

At that time, 45,000 of our kids could not go to school because of lack of schools.

He built a school in each village, and by 1960, universal primary education was achieved.

This 21st Century is the Knowledge Century and will be driven by brains, not poorly educated or semi-skilled workers.

The last two Centuries, i.e. the agricultural revolution and the industrial revolution did not require brains. But this Century will require brains to drive the economy.

In a document titled “What Britain can learn from the OECD’s PISA Education ranking”, it is stated – “Unlike in previous generations, there are few good opportunities left for poorly educated young people. The countries that understand this shift and manage to run education system preparing all of their young people for this future will win the global economic race. More importantly, they will have few human casualties.”

Therefore, we have to ensure that our children get an education that will enable them to confront the emerging challenges more effectively.

Ladies and Gentlemen

Glad am I to note that the theme you have chosen to celebrate this year’s World Teacher’s Day is “Invest in the Future, Invest in Teachers.”

Your theme is no doubt very pertinent.

You deserve to be congratulated.

I have said it previously, and even in this Forum, there is no nobler profession to a country than that of the teacher.
And those who educate our children are more to be honoured and respected, by everyone, be it the pupils, the parents and the administrators.

We all know that the foundation that builds a person in life is to a great extent based on the knowledge and education he gets from his teacher.

As William Glasser, an American Psychiatrist and Master Therapist puts it:

“It is the supreme art of the teacher to awaken joy in creative expression and knowledge.”

I am sure, every one of us who remembers his education remembers the teacher first.

The teacher is and remains the heart of any educational system.

As a teacher, you talk with the child, not at the child.

You convey information.

You assist the pupils and inspire them.

You are a role model who inspires and encourages our children to strive for greatness, live their fullest potential and see the best in themselves.

They learn through you, through your commitment to excellence.

At six to eight hours a day, you as teachers are poised to become one of the most influential persons in a pupil’s life.

You not only watch them grow, you also help them grow.

Your role as teacher should therefore be seen as a transformer of the child.

That’s why you need to develop an environment in the classroom where you feel that you are sitting next to your pupils, working out problems together.

And not appear as talking from the blackboard across the room.

We should prevent our schools from becoming warehouses.

Instead, they should be temple of learning.

What we need is, as Swami Vivekananda, has said “an education by which the character of the child is formed, the strength of his mind is increased, his intellect is expanded, and by which he can stand on his own foot.”

Remember however, that “teaching is not only a job, but more importantly a divine responsibility” as the Prime Minister of India Shri Narendra Modi stated on the occasion of Teacher’s Day in India this year.

There always have been in our country, and ever will be, inspiring men and women who are teachers in the highest and most noble sense, believing in and committed to unlocking the potential of those they are required to teach.
To them, we owe our deepest gratitude on this auspicious occasion.

*Ladies and Gentlemen*

For the past two years, I have been systematically and invariably highlighting a number of problem areas that I sincerely believe are affecting the education of our children.

I have also spoken on the need for a value-based education that can help our children mould and develop their character; make them become enlightened and responsible citizens in life.

As has been stated by the former President of India, Mr. Abdul Kalam, in his book, "*Indomitable Spirit*", there is need for value based education system and our teachers should be trained to teach moral values at least once a week for one hour.

A couple of weeks ago, I have read an article in the *Daily Telegraph* about UK schools churning out amoral children because of the lack of a rounded education.

Of late, I have noted that many of the issues I raised have aroused a lot of interest and debate.

I sincerely believe that I had to bring them up for the common good of our children.

Because there is no denying that a good education, particularly, one that upholds excellence is the base for everything in life.

It is our duty to provide every child with an excellent education.

The question that begs is whether our schools are keeping pace with such an imperative.

Many countries are transforming their education in order to adapt it to the needs of the day.

Mauritius cannot be an exception.

I have the impression at times that our schools are producing students that are unprepared to face the rigours and requirements of the modern workplace, as is the situation in UK at present, where many of those leaving schools are not employable because of lack of appropriate skills.

Let me stress that, as long as our education system stresses training children to become dependent, to be good followers, I can assure you that we will never be able to unlock their potential.

That's why to-day, I have opted to bring a new dimension to my speech.

I want to talk to you on the challenges and imperatives of excellence in our education system.
As you know, a good education is the foundation upon which we can build for a better and more innovative future.

In this 21st Century, we need an educational model that truly empowers and provides opportunities for our children.

The role of any education system should be to help each child optimise his potential by inculcating in him values such as life skills, literacy, numeracy and social skills.

Such values are undoubtedly the mission of any school.

To-day, the debate on school reform is about how, and how soon, the best can become the norm.

It was Mr Seegum himself who said in this same august Assembly last year that in many of our schools, pupils in Standard III cannot read and write.

I don't know where the problem is.

Is it poor teaching?

I don't think so.

Our children are not born fools.

Children are born ready to learn.

We make them become fools through the way we bring them up.

As we know, the quality of a school rarely exceeds the quality of its teachers.

In the achievement of a good education, both the schools and teachers matter.

In fact, the best education systems across the world consider great teachers as their driving force towards excellence.

But we must empower our teachers so they can give the best of themselves.

Empowerment is a process through which teachers become capable of engaging in, sharing control of, and influencing events in a school.

Therefore, teachers need to be completely involved in the decision making process, problem solving, strategy formulation, skills development and capabilities and knowledge.

And this is both in the interest of the school and the pupils.

It has been established beyond doubt that all ambitious reforms that are conceived would prove futile if teachers are ineffective in their practices.

The President of the GTU has himself personally acknowledged that he was not consulted on the Nine Year Schooling project.
Educationists and policy makers fully acknowledge the fact that the success of all reforms towards “Excellence in Education” largely depends on the attitudes and capacities of teachers because they are the guardians of the reforms.

Education specialists have identified six dimensions for Teachers’ empowerment, namely:

(i) decision-making – teachers’ participation in critical decisions that directly affect their work - that are genuine and actually impact on real outcomes;

(ii) professional growth – opportunities given to grow and develop professionally by constant training and teacher education;

(iii) self-efficacy – whereby the teacher is fully equipped with the skills and ability to help students to learn.

(iv) autonomy – i.e. they have control on various aspects of their work, like scheduling, curriculum development and adaptation, selection of text books.

These will automatically lead teachers to take personal interest in the education of their pupils, and also in the improvement of the schools.

Schools are said to fail where –

(i) there are rigid policies and confusions;

(ii) people especially, teachers are treated like “interchangeable parts”; 

(iii) teachers do not have enough skills, resources or knowledge to do the job;

(iv) there is lack of support and responsibility – no authority;

(v) ways of measuring your own performance do not exist; and

(vi) there is meaningless work, no challenges, assignments are the same.

In many countries, the 21st Century schools have acquired –

• new dimensions; and

• have been fully equipped to embrace new roles and responsibilities.

With accelerated changes in the world, in this Century, schools are no longer agencies to impart education only.

They are now agencies of reform, of change, and of growing awareness and responsibility.

Classrooms have gone major transformation.

To-day, teachers are required to identify problems and to take prompt remedial measures.
Quality education means not only improvement in academic results but more importantly, with overall development.

Brain storming activities which consider a subject from different angles such as –

- describing;
- comparing;
- analysing;
- applying; and
- arguing

have become imperative.

This is what helps the child to develop critical, logical thinking, with creativity and application.

*Ladies and Gentlemen*

We should not only live with figures.

We should also look at the quality of the results.

We have had failures in VI\textsuperscript{th} standard even when I was at primary school.

When I was in VI\textsuperscript{th} standard in 1959, many of my friends failed. There were repeater classes. But even if they failed, there were jobs for them, especially, in the sugar industry, to work as labourers or “meunier”. Now, that is not available.

I am not blaming anybody. This is a situation we have inherited for more than 60 years.

However, we must address the issue now. Lowering the standards is not the option

Let me quote an extract from an article that appeared in the issue of *Le Mauricien* of 21 December 2013.

(Quote)

“C’est le cas des 400 réciipients du certificat du CPE avec seulement 6 à 10 unités et qui ont obtenu leur visa pour la Forme I qui est diversement commentée parmi les pédagogues. Dans les collèges où ont été dirigés ces élèves, on entend la même réaction : *Leur niveau est trop faible*.

Dans les collèges catholiques où l’on a adopté le concept de mixed abilities depuis 2005 en admettant des élèves ayant obtenu 15 à 20 unités, les enseignants avouent leurs difficultés à faire progresser des élèves en dépit de leurs efforts.
“Même avec 15 unités que nous avons jugé comme un critère académique raisonnable à l’entrée du secondaire beaucoup d’élèves éprouvent des difficultés à continuer et certains abandonnent après la form IV” dit un enseignant de carrière d’un collège catholique.

Plusieurs recteurs dans les collèges privés ont été stupéfaits en prenant connaissance des résultats des admis envoyés par la MES.

“Nous n’avons jamais eu auparavant chez nous des élèves avec sept unités. Avec seulement six unités, cela veut dire que ces enfants ont obtenu la note la plus basse et ne maîtrisent pas les concepts de base en lecture, écriture et calcul. Ils ne pourront suivre le curriculum de la Form I. C’est mentir à ces élèves que de leur faire croire qu’avec de tels résultats ils peuvent aller jusqu’au SC.”

Let me also quote what President Barack Obama said in the context of the programme of “No Child Left Behind”, he initiated in 2011:

(Quote)

“In recent years, 15 states (in the US) have actually lowered their standards to make it easier for their kids to meet the targets set by “No Child Left Behind”. Think about that. That was – that’s a pretty perverse incentive when states say to themselves, you know what, let’s lower our standards so that we have an easy time – easier time passing those standards so that we don’t get punished under the “No Child Left Behind”. That makes no sense. That’s inexcusable.”

We all agree that we should enlarge access to education.

But at the same time, we should also not compromise on quality.

As Dr. Ashish Nanda, a double degree holder from Harvard University, Director of ITT in Bangalore has this to say, in a debate on New Delhi Television (NDTV) on Excellence in Teaching:

“We should allow access but we cannot compromise on quality. Lowering the standard means a race to the bottom.”

Now in the context we are living in, we cannot afford to lose one of our children in his educational journey.

As I said in those days, there were jobs available for poorly educated children.

To-day, such possibilities do not exist.

So what do we do? Do we continue to race towards the bottom by lowering standards?

Mind you, I am not talking through my hat.
Whatever I am saying this morning is contained in books and papers that I have read, for example, “Education, Education, Education – Reforming the British Schools” by Andrew Adonis, now Lord Adonis.

It was Confucius who said:

(Quote)

“Learning without thought is labour lost; Thought without learning is perilous.” (Unquote)

Educate means drawing out, and not pushing in.

Knowledge is continuous; ideas flow.

We need to master the vision and the will to change the education of our children.

For that purpose, we have to bring teaching and education into closer alignment with the realities in the classrooms.

This is where I come to reading and writing.

David Blunkett, a former British Education Minister had this to say and I quote:

“If you can’t read, you can’t learn.” (Unquote)

So, reading and writing should also constitute an important component of the assessment criterion for a child’s education.

Reading is key to learning. Since then all statements, writings of educationists and experts have pointed to the sum direction.

I will just refer to you the various speeches that Sir Michael Wilshaw has made on this topic – they are all available on the website.

It has been estimated that 75% of academic success is predicted by reading ability.

In this regard, we should seriously consider of including in our school curriculum a 30-minute writing and reading component.

A 30-minute reading has been found to be imperative for primary school students to create and inculcate a culture of reading that will greatly increase their literacy as well as writing skills.

Virtually, the school curriculum should require children to read if they are to learn successfully.

We may have to teach our pupils how to read since an early age by making use of modern and well adapted techniques and pedagogy.
We must also motivate them to read a lot of books as reading has been established to enhance the academic performance of a child in all subjects.

However, for pupils to be motivated and book-reading to be effective, it must be personalized, individualized and accountable.

Our primary schools must also have a well-established and state-of-the-art library so that our children can have access to books.

That’s how we are going to assess and achieve progress.

That’s also how we will inculcate the value of excellence in education based on greater accountability for performance and results, and that empowers our teachers and students.

There is another dimension in the whole assessment process that also needs to be canvassed in the spirit of excellence achievement.

Each and every school needs a good leadership as a criterion for success.

The essential characteristics of a good school for excellent learning are -

- some autonomy to the Head Teachers;
- excellent teaching;
- an ambitious curriculum;
- discipline; and
- parental involvement.

Head Teachers have a crucial role to play in the success of their schools.

Because as Sir Michael Wilshaw, Head of Ofstead and Inspector General of schools in UK says :

"Good and ambitious Head Teachers …… are an ally in helping improve schools and tackle deep seated problems."

Head Teachers concentrate on the basics, the culture of the school, behavior, and most importantly, the quality of teaching in the classroom.

Teaching, quality teaching, indeed is central to the life of any school.

Therefore, my appeal to you this morning is our country’s long-term competitiveness without forgetting that the vitality of its culture, the strength of its civic life rest in no small measure on the quality of education that we provide to our children.

The famous poet, Kahlil Gibran, makes the point eloquently :

(Quote)

"Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of life’s longing for itself."
My dear teachers, let me conclude by quoting a saying of Mahatma Gandhi:

(quote)

“Be the change that you wish to see most in your world.” (Unquote)

I wish you all good luck and success in your endeavor.

God Bless You!

I thank you for your attention.