

REVIEW OF THE RECONSTITUTED NATIONAL EDUCATION CONFERENCE

The Department of Education hosted seventeen (17) national education conferences with regular frequency up until 2000. After the 17th National Education Conference (NEC) in 2000 there was a hiatus of five years then the reconstituted NEC was launched by the Ministry of Education in 2005. The purpose of the NEC prior to 2005 was essentially to keep educators abreast of emerging trends in education and to promote professional growth through seminars and workshops.

In December 2004, The Hon. Alfred M. Sears, former Minister of Education appointed the National Education Conference Committee (NECC) comprising twenty-six members from educational stakeholder groups in both the public and private sectors. The Minister appointed the NECC three months after the president of The Bahamas Union of Teachers, Mr. Kingsley L. Black (1993-2005) made a presentation to him on a proposal to infuse the national education system with a passion for innovation through the launch of a reconstituted National Education Conference in an effort to improve the quality of education in The Bahamas, continuously. He directed the NECC to organize and host the reconstituted 18th NEC.

The 18th National Education Conference was hosted by the NECC on behalf of the Ministry of Education 3rd – 7th July 2005 under the theme: ***“Transforming Bahamian Education for the 21st Century.”*** The major difference between the 18th NEC and its predecessors was the shift in focus from issues affecting the pedagogy to issues affecting the national education system and the quality of education in the Commonwealth of The Bahamas. Additionally, the participants at the 18th NEC included representatives from the full range of educational stakeholder groups from both the public and private sectors instead of just educators from the public sector. Inspired by the old African proverb: “It takes a whole village to raise one child,” the thrust of the 18th NEC was to create and maintain a national network comprising of representatives of all educational stakeholder groups to create and maintain a national dialogue on education, and to apply the collective wisdom of the stakeholders to assist with improving the quality of education continuously.

The two main objectives of the 18th NEC were:

- To begin the examination of the national education system (both public and private sectors); and
- To develop meaningful dialogue between all educational stakeholder groups to address the weaknesses of the system and to recommend working solutions to strengthen it.

The second objective was achieved during the conference: To promote dialogue on many of the issues impacting the transformation of the education system to meet 21st century standards, among the seven hundred delegates in attendance at the 18th NEC, sixty three

specialty/focus sessions were conducted for three days. “The specialty sessions were facilitated by educators from public and independent schools as well as experts and professionals from tertiary institutions, the private sector, business and industry, and civic and religious organizations. Key issues addressed during the sessions focused on eight strands: Strategic Planning, Teaching and Learning, School Reform, Policy and Management Issues, School Safety and Discipline, Professional Development/Capacity Building, Special Populations, and Partnerships. Topics were designed to encourage spirited discussion and accurate assessment of the current status of education and to serve as a vehicle for proposing realistic and significant recommendations for the transformation process. Participants encouraged by provocative presentations and pleased with the opportunity to be actively involved in determining the direction of Bahamian education in the 21st century, willingly shared best practices, exchanged strategies, voiced concerns and proffered a wide range of recommendations (See 18th NEC Final Report Recommendations).”

It was agreed that the first objective would be pursued in earnest after the conference. To this end, the seven hundred delegates unanimously adopted the Declaration of Commitment to Education in the Commonwealth of The Bahamas which included a work plan for the post-conference activities. Preparation for the implementation of the post-conference activities began in September 2005 after Mr. Kingsley L. Black the former president of The Bahamas Union of Teachers was appointed Assistant Director of Education and given responsibility for the National Education Conference Secretariat. The NECC reviewed the work plan in February 2006 after feedback from educational stakeholders including the Department of Education underscored the need for radical adjustments. The Revised Work Plan was ratified by the NECC and approved by the Minister of Education in February 2006. As a prelude to its implementation, meetings were held by the members of the NECC to discuss the Revised Work Plan with educational stakeholder groups from Inagua to Bimini during the period February – October 2006. Feedback from stakeholders throughout the country led to the refinement of the Revised Work Plan. Between October 2006 and February 2007, ADE Black prepared the Draft 18th NEC Handbook which outlines the structure of the NEC, and lists the policies and procedures for the function of the NEC and the implementation of the post-conference activities. The NECC ratified the document and the Minister approved it in February 2007.

The implementation of the Revised Work Plan commenced with the appointment of over one hundred and thirty (130) subject councilors by the Minister of Education and the hosting of the Subject Councils Inaugural Meeting by the NECC, 20th – 21st March 2007. The objectives of the Subject Councils Inaugural Meeting were to:

- Discuss the mandate of the subject councils;
- Review the guidelines that will govern how the subject councils will operate;
- Prepare the Humanities, Science and Technical & Vocational Education councils to examine the national education system and to prepare a report on their findings for presentation at the 18th National Education Conference Mid-term Review; and to

- Ensure that officers were elected or appointed to provide leadership to each council.

The only objective which was not achieved in full was the election/appointment of officers to establish the executive committees for the three subject councils: the Science and Technical & Vocational Education councils elected officers but the Humanities Council did not, and the appointment of chairpersons, deputy chairpersons and research officers for the three councils by the NECC remained outstanding.

The distribution of both the 18 NEC Final Report and the handbook began at the Subject Councils Inaugural Meeting. They were further distributed to other stakeholders including schools and libraries after the Inaugural Meeting.

Shortly after the Subject Councils Inaugural Meeting the campaign for national elections began, and it became difficult to continue the implementation of the post-conference activities. So they were suspended until after the elections. A new government was elected on May 2nd 2007, and the activities of the NECS remained in limbo pending confirmation that the initiative would continue. ADE Black met with the Hon. Carl Bethel, the new Minister of Education, Youth, Sports, & Culture in June and he confirmed that the activities of the NEC would continue.

The NECC met July 5th 2007 and addressed outstanding issues including the appointment of members of the Subject Councils Coordinating Committee, appointment of officers of the three subject councils as required and resolving issues raised by councilors at the Inaugural Meeting. The NECC finalized its decisions on these matters at its meeting on September 4th 2007.

ADE Black met with the Hon. Carl W. Bethel, Minister of Education, Youth, Sports, & Culture, Mrs. Elma Garraway, Permanent Secretary and Ms. Lenora Archer, Deputy Director of Education on September 5th 2007 to discuss concerns about the status of the NECS. At this meeting, the Minister directed ADE Black to do the following:

- To reconstitute the NECC, and ensure that the Department of Education plays a major role in its function; and
- Revise the Revised Work Plan: rename subject councils (SC), advisory committees since they will not be examining subject areas; reconstitute the SC's so that curriculum officers are not the chairs - use stakeholders from outside of the Ministry; limit the enquiry of the advisory committees to four core areas: Access, Quality, Leadership/Professionalism, and Partnership, conduct the Mid-Term Review by 31st March 2008; eliminate phase two of the post-conference activities in light of the other proposed changes and because it is too much to tackle prior to the 19th NEC; and host the 19th NEC in 2009 with only three subject councils/advisory committees and not seventeen as originally planned.

ADE Black is currently concluding a comprehensive review of the entire reconstituted NEC initiative, and the implementation of the post-conference activities will resume in the New Year. The major changes which are foreshadowed in the review include:

- Replacement of the three Subject Councils with three Education Advisory Committees,
- Elimination of the Coordinating Committee,
- Elimination of phase 2 of the post-conference activities.
- Adjustments to the mandate and terms of reference of Education Advisory Committees,
- Replacement of Professional Associations with Subject Councils, and
- Restructure of the National Education Conference Committee.

