



**REMARKS BY
THE RIGHT HONOURABLE HUBERT A. INGRAHAM
PRIME MINISTER OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF
THE BAHAMAS**

at the

OPENING OF THE SYBIL BLYDEN CENTRE

on

THURSDAY, 14TH MAY, 2011

10:00 AM

Mr. Deputy,

Colleague Ministers & Members of Parliament,

Mrs. Elma Garraway, Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Education;

Mr. Lowell Mortimer, President of The Bahamas Association for the Mentally Retarded;

Mr. Lionel Sands, Director of Education;

Members of the family of the Late Sybil Blyden;

Reverend Phillip Stubbs, Pastor, St. Michael's Methodist Church;

Senior Education Officers;

Mrs. Angela Butler, Principal;

Teachers, Staff and Students;

Parents and Friends of Stapledon;

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am very pleased to participate in the official opening and naming of the Sybil Blyden Centre here at the Stapledon School. I wish to extend sincerest thanks to The Bahamas Association for the Mentally Retarded led by Mr. Lowell Mortimer and other generous donors who

embraced Mrs. Blyden's dream of a centre to provide vocational training and instruction for the students of the Stapledon School.

I also thank the volunteers and the parents who give of their time and talents partnering with the Ministry of Education to fulfill the mission of the Stapledon School to equip students with skills which will enable them to lead independent and productive lives.

Today's opening of this new vocational training centre is another important demonstration of the power of public-private sector partnership in education.

Just last Friday we opened the magnificent Harry C. Moore Library at the College of The Bahamas, the fruit of the labour of the Lyford Cay Foundation, The College of The Bahamas community and the Government to create a state-of-the-art knowledge-centered institution meant to benefit all of our citizens.

Similarly, this vocational training centre at Stapledon has been realized through the joint effort of public and private sectors. In particular, I acknowledge and thank The Bahamas Association for the Mentally Retarded for their most generous contribution of some \$1.7 million toward the development of this new Centre. I thank also the

families and friends of the students of this school who continuously offer support in both time and money.

I acknowledge and thank all those involved in this project: Anthony Jervis, Architect, Alder Minus, contractor and all sub-contractors and workmen who laboured in this venture.

The opening of the Sybil Blyden Centre is especially satisfying as the Government aims to fulfill its pledge to educate and train all our children including those with special needs.

I hasten to acknowledge that our broader national educational mission will always be best accomplished through the collaboration of public and private interests as is perhaps most vividly demonstrated by the Government's Grant-in-Aid assistance to church-operated schools.

I'll mention a few of the private-public partnerships in the area of special needs education.

The leading role played by the Salvation Army at the School for the Blind is noteworthy as is the valuable support of the House Management Team headed by Dr. Vincent Campbell in support of the

Centre for the Deaf. Many of you will recall that the Centre for the Deaf had its origins as an initiative of The Bahamas Red Cross.

In Grand Bahama, the Beacon School is yet another wonderful example of a public-private collaboration bringing enhanced education and training opportunities to students with special needs.

The Government remains firmly committed to continuing its financial and administrative support to these primary special needs schools which include providing premises, salaried administrators, specialists' teachers and other teaching resources to each of these institutions.

I hasten to note that our success in this area is made difficult by the considerable deficiency in the number of Bahamian special education teachers. Indeed, we remain heavily reliant upon the engagement of expatriate teachers, hence our reliance upon expatriate teachers to meet the demand.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Deficiencies notwithstanding, it was the privilege of my former administration during the late 1990s, to have assisted in the expansion of

responses on the part of Government to better meet the educational needs of children requiring special assistance arising from intellectual disabilities and various forms of developmental delay.

We recognized then that developmentally challenged individuals cover a very wide range of conditions, the majority of which do not preclude skills training that will permit them to lead more independent and productive lives.

I recall that the Stapledon School first introduced instruction in autism in 1997 and created a centre catering to Autistic Spectrum students in 1999. That same year the Government established an Autistic Spectrum Teaching Unit at the Garvin Tynes Primary School. That Unit was meant to cater to students aged five years to 12. However the absence of a high school programme meant that students often remained at Garvin Tynes well beyond the maximum age of 12.

The programme was only formally expanded to the junior high level with the opening of the Anatol Rodgers Jr. High School in 2008. I am told that a group of students over age 12 who remain enlisted in the programme at Garvin Tynes will transfer to the Anatol Rogers School at the beginning of the next school year.

The programme at the Anatol Rodgers Jr. High School is most properly described as a Pre-vocational Unit consisting of two specialist classrooms, for persons with one of the various disabilities associated with Autism Spectrum disorders.

And, S.C. McPherson Junior High School has a Pre-Vocational Unit for adolescents with various disabilities that is meant to better prepare them for the transition from school to work.

Two landmark programmes, in cosmetology and agriculture, instituted here at the Stapledon School in partnership with the Centre for the Deaf provide interactive training for students from both institutions.

And, a “Transition School to Work Programme” has been introduced which, trains students in landscaping, housekeeping, crafts, car detailing and ceramics.

We are convinced that skills acquired at this school will improve the self esteem of intellectually disabled students, help them to see themselves as contributing members of their communities and hence much better prepared to move into the world of employment.

I am very pleased that after completing the “Transition Programme” here at Stapledon, six former students are presently working at the Wyndham Cable Beach Resort. This wonderfully demonstrates what the future can hold for other students at Stapledon particularly with the enhanced training facilities now available at this school.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am advised that education experts believe that significant benefits are derived from the integration of special needs students into the regular school system wherever possible and that ‘Inclusive Education and Mainstreaming’ will increasingly broaden opportunities for special needs students in our school system.

Classes of deaf students have been incorporated into some of our mainstream schools over the years and of course our Autistic Education Units were established in mainstream schools.

I am told that recently, a Stapledon student was mainstreamed at the Government High School for Art classes, four days per week. A small first step perhaps, but one considered a milestone by many Special

Education teachers who believe that we are seeing the through the success of this student.

I applaud efforts to recognize the abilities and talents of our special needs students who have for far too long been assessed primarily on what they could not do, rather on what they can achieve.

Our efforts to celebrate diversity and teach tolerance should continue to include the acceptance of special needs students as a part of the broader school and national communities.

I think that few if any of you would argue that we do not need to do more to promote and encourage greater tolerance, patience and understanding for those who are different from ourselves. And that allowing for others to be different but considered just as blessed as ourselves, fosters kindness and gentleness, and an aversion to anger and violence and intolerance.

We can thank the foresight of people like Eunice Kennedy Shriver who in the early 1960s agreed to financially support the idea of a Chicago area physical education teacher who sought to hold a special Olympic-style sports event for special needs children.

That teacher, Anne Burke, believed that special needs students have various talents among them athleticism. Today, we all share her view. Indeed, the Government has for some time now sponsored the participation of our own special needs athletes in Special Olympics. All of us share in the glory when they return home victorious for having participated and whether or not received medals.

Our Bahamian Anne Burke and Eunice Kennedy Shriver was Sybil Elvira Blyden. Like Ms. Burke and Mrs. Shriver, Mrs. Blyden believed that special needs students have various talents and she was committed to identifying and sharpening those talents to help those students achieve whatever their best might be.

Clearly the day is now long past when we believed that children with learning and/or intellectual disabilities should be hidden away because they could not be trained or would never be able to live independent and productive lives.

The growth in our understanding of these special needs students and in our responses to those needs have been greatly influenced over the years by the wisdom and farsightedness of the wonderfully kind Sybil Blyden whom we have the great honour of honouring today.

I am especially pleased that we are able to name this new Centre in her memory and in acknowledgment and recognition of her extraordinary service to special education and indeed to our country.

Ladies and Gentlemen

Mrs. Sybil Elvira Blyden, whom we honour here today with the naming of this Centre at the Stapledon School, spent much of her life lifting up the less fortunate in our community.

I am told that Mrs. Blyden was twice denied the opportunity to study at the Government High School, not for lack of intellectual acumen of which she had much, but because her parents could not afford her that luxury.

She did not despair nor did she fail to make good for herself. She completed school as was available to her, married and raised a family. Then, she made the time to return to school, attending evening classes which enabled her to acquire her Cambridge Senior Certificate. That certificate would today translate into completing high school and passing a minimum of five BGCSEs at C or above, including English Language and mathematics.

At the age of 37 Mrs. Blyden commenced studies leading to a teaching certification, something she accomplished in just 2 years. Subsequently she earned a certificate in “Teaching the Handicapped”.

Mrs. Blyden would have been the first among us to say that what has been accomplished at Stapledon is the fruit of the labour of many people. I take this opportunity to recognize also some of those who followed in her footsteps, individuals like Dr. Coralyn Hanna, and Mrs. Sheila Culmer to name just two.

I wish to end by thanking those who continue to serve in the tradition of Sybil Blyden and other community servants who, in uplifting our special needs and disabled students, lifted up the entire country by their example.

It now gives me great pleasure to declare the Sybil Blyden Centre officially open.
