

SPEECH DELIVERED BY
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ON THE OCCASION MARKING THE
THE LAUNCH OF THE INTER-HIGH SCHOOL NATIONAL DEBATES

THEME:

“BUILDING A SCHOLARLY CHARACTER IN THE LIBERIAN STUDENT”

Centennial Memorial Pavilion, Monrovia, Liberia

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Hon. Hawa Goll-Kotchie,
Deputy Minister for Instructions, Ministry of Education
& Other Officials of the Ministry of Education;
Mr. Doyen and Members of Diplomatic Corps;
Officials of Government;
Partners in Education;
Students from across the Fifteen Political Sub-Divisions of Liberia;
Members of the Fourth Estate;

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am honored and delighted to have been chosen from among many Liberian scholastic and intellectual juggernauts to serve as Guest Speaker at this momentous occasion marking the launch of the Inter-High School National Debates. When I received the invitation to speak to you on the theme: **“Building Scholarly Character in the Liberian Student”** at the launch of the Inter-High School National Debates, I gladly accepted in spite of my terribly hectic national and international engagements. My acceptance of the invitation is informed by my belief that the institutionalization of the culture of debates among high school students by no less than the Ministry of Education is a record breaking accomplishment that will go a long way in solidifying the foundations of education and intellectualism in our country and transforming many a young person from mediocrity to excellence; hence, I could not afford not to be supportive of this transformative initiative.

The late iconic and legendary freedom fighter, former South African President Nelson Mandela once said, “No country can really develop unless its citizens are educated.” Education or proper intellectual cultivation is not only acquired within the rectangular walls of a classroom. Proper education comes from years of positive socialization and conditioning acquired from different sources, different experiences, and different places. Again the philosopher and novelist George Satanyana was so right when he said, “The child educated only at school is an uneducated child.”

So the Ministry of Education and all of its partners are more than deserving of our profuse thanks and appreciation for endeavoring to bring back to our school system the culture of studiousness, research, hard work, and the great tradition of debate among the young students of Liberia.

A multidimensional task requiring combined efforts from the: Family, schools, students and the Government

The Liberian student is a subset of the Liberian society. Positive attributes of the Liberian society, will more often than not, be imbibed by the Liberian student; conversely, negative attributes of the Liberian society usually leads to negative attributes in the Liberian student. So if we will succeed in building a scholarly character in the Liberian student, we must also endeavor to build a scholarly character in the Liberian society.

Various players and stakeholders of the society impact on the development of a young person. So the task of building a scholarly character in the Liberian student is a multidimensional one which requires the combined efforts of the family, the schools, the media, the students themselves and the national government.

The family has a great responsibility in this process of building a scholarly character in the Liberia student because the family is the individual's first point of contact with his community. The family in order words is the foundation-stone of society. It is within families that the initial formation of the thought processes of young people is begun. A young person's outlook, interests and habits are deeply influenced by what he/she experiences at the level of the family. If a child sees his father or mother reading a book every day, the inquisitive nature that is inherent in everyone will likely spur that child's interest in trying to find book to read as well. On the contrary, if a child does not see his mother or father reading a book or even caring to keep one, that child will most likely think that books are anathema to his or her development or wellbeing. Children will exhibit in school what they are taught at home and that is why the parents must rise up and give more attention to what their children do.

The family must show a sense of appreciation for scholarly things in order to inspire in their children the consciousness for scholarship. This does not necessarily mean that parents must have PHDS before they inspire their children aspiring to have PHDs. I have heard breathtaking stories of poor and uneducated fathers and mothers who in spite of their poverty and lack of education struggled and sold the charcoal, the bitter-balls and pepper and sometimes even afforded to go without a day's meal just to pay the tuition of their children. By otherwise simple and thoughtful actions such as placing the payment of the tuition of their children on the top of their scale of preference when they set their priorities, parents can instill in their children a sense of respect for not just education but research-driven investigative education. There are some fundamental questions that we must pose: what gifts do parents buy for their children? How many parents buy news papers for their children to read and become au courant with current events that are obtaining in Liberia, on the African continent and in the world as a whole? How many parents take up at least fifteen minutes of their time to sit down with their children after work to review their copybooks and run a general diagnostic inquiry of how their children are doing in their studies? Do parents encourage their children to listen to Patrick Honnah's "Bumper Show" on LBS or Mamadee Diakate's "Truth Breakfast Show" on Truth FM or Sister Mary Laurene Browne's "Reading Time" program on Radio Veritas or Richard Quest's "Quest Means Business" on CNN? In every child there is an intellectual void and a burning thirst that calls for quenching and parents at the family level must lead the way in providing the necessary guidance and mentorship that imbue in the young and impressionable minds the love for scholarly accomplishments.

The Peer Group

To build scholarly character in students would mean that parents must ensure that **the peers** that their children follow must themselves pass the parents

evaluation of deportment. Parents must never refrain from engaging their children at all levels of their development especially during their formative years. Any responsible and caring parent would like to know what kind of peers your children mingle and interact with. Who are the friends of our children? Do they have scholastic characters that can impact positively on them? If a child does not do well in say mathematics, it is only rationale that a friend who knows mathematics is at the top of his friendship list so that he benefits from the mathematical prowess of his friend.

Roles of Institutions

Institutions of learning can build scholarly character in students by creating the ambience that promotes scholarly and academic culture. Schools must build libraries and research centers that are conducive for learning. We need places for our students that can compete with the cinemas and the beaches. There must be fantastic reading rooms and recreation centers that can compete with the fantastic Fridays that see our students flood the beaches and beer bars expending their youthful energies and exuberance on things that will accrue little benefits to them in the future.

Many persons may not have the means to purchase a ticket to travel out of the country; and certainly, the generation of today cannot interact with the generation of the past. However, through the magic of reading one can travel to the far flung corners of the world and take a flight in time and interact with the great philosophers of Athens. Through books and research students could travel through the ages and interact with the likes of Socrates who is credited by Cicero for bringing philosophy down from the heavens to earth by using syllogism and inductive arguments to discuss the deep-seated issues of his days bordering on justice and morality.

Students do not have to go to Mali to know about Mansa Kanka Musa and the ancient scrolls in the libraries at Timbuktu, students do not have to go to France to know about Voltaire who is famous for saying "I do not agree with what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it," students do not have to go to Germany to know about Martin Luther and the protestant revolution, involving the Bolsheviks. Students, if they must know these things and at the same time be able to contextualize them and assign them varying degrees of historical relevance, must cultivate the scholarly character of reading, research, cross-examination. Institutions of learning can help build a scholarly character in the Liberian student scholarship by providing them with the incentives that stimulate their interest in research. Schools should institutionalize and regularize the practice of awarding prizes to students for their academic performances. Students develop what I call "positive envy" for their colleagues when they see them being recognized and put on the pedestal for academic excellence.

Recognizing students for academic excellence has a double barrel effect. Firstly, it encourages high performers to do better and motivates the low performers to buckle and put in their all. When we recognize our students we give them our approbation that what they are doing is desirable and in the best interest of themselves and our country, but when we act insensitive and callous to their achievements we derail their self-confidence and demoralize them.

In fact, as a way of promoting excellence among young people, I will be proposing the conferral of national distinctions on the top three performers in the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) nationwide exams during the annual July 26 Celebrations. Individuals who distinguish themselves in the Liberian society are deserving of national distinctions; and one does not have to be old and gray before he or she is put on the pedestal of national honor. Honoring the best of the best in the Liberian school system every year will inspire and motivate other students to aspire for excellence in their studies.

Promoting the culture of debate

Public and private corporations operating in Liberia need to sponsor the debate programs of institutions of learning as a way of strengthening the debate culture in society. Debate is a valuable positive feature for any society. The more debates people engage into, the more tolerant they become of opposing views and perspectives because they realize that what matters is not their physique or skin pigmentation or the depth of their pockets but the soundness and validity of their ideas and arguments. When the culture of debates is institutionalized people tend to disagree agreeably, thereby reducing the possibility of violent confrontations and increasing the possibility of peaceful co-existence. The person who quickly throws a blow or fires a gun in an argument or a contentious situation is a person who quickly runs out of solid ideas and arguments that can debunk their opponents.

The Mass Media

In this age of globalization and technological advancement, it is almost impossible to build a scholarly character in students if the media does not play a responsible role. The media has a very critical role because much of what students hear and read every day comes from the microphones and pens of journalists. The stories that journalists write and the stories that they read help to inform the thinking of students. The words or phrases commonly used by journalists on radio may sooner than later become the words and phrases used by many young people in their conversations; and the quality or standard of writing journalists employ in their newspapers will soon be adopted by many young people as the acceptable standard of writing. Therefore, journalists must be conscious of their critical role in society and never back pedal on professionalism. If journalists speak proper English and write clear and

understandable stories, where subject and verb agree, punctuation marks are rightfully assigned and run-on sentences do not exist, it is most likely that students will themselves speak and compose appropriately.

Journalist should inspire inquisitiveness in students Journalists should therefore not just seek to attract attention of students by the flamboyance and colorful nature of the graphic designs of their newspapers but should instead inspire students by the substance of the contents of the newspapers.

The media can be a realm of great learning as it can be a real of naked brainwash, so parents must also encourage their children to listen to and watch informative programs that hold immense scholarly benefits and flip the channel or change the dial from programs that do not impact their scholarly development. Parents must also regulate the television viewing time of their children to enable them dedicate more time to their studies. We can only build a scholarly character in students if we take sound and effective actions that rope together the family, the schools, the peer group, the mass media, the communities and the national government through a network of mutually reinforcing programs and activities.

What does a scholarly character mean to students

To my young student colleagues from all across the fifteen political sub-divisions of our country who will be participating in the Inter High-School National Debates, let me say to you, a scholar is one who is inquisitive, curious, researching, analyzing, computing, as well as reporting. A scholar is like an oasis in the Sahara Desert providing water for thirsty travelers. A scholar is someone who takes up assignments or home-works not assigned by the instructor. A scholar must be conscious, a scholar does not outsource his thinking, a scholar must not be superficial or fake, and a scholar must have integrity.

To the MOE and Government

Before I recede to my seat, I once again like to commend profusely the new and vigorous team at the Ministry of Education for their far-sightedness and hard work in trying to rebrand the educational landscape of Liberia. Similar initiatives have been launched in the past, but they have faltered. I hope and trust that that this launch will not be the end of this endeavor. I anticipate the expansion of this and related programs to even the smallest schools in the far-flung areas of this country.

National Government

As the budget debate heats on and various priorities are being advanced by various stakeholders, I call on all the governmental stakeholders in the process to lend budgetary support to this worthy initiative which accommodates students across the length and breadth of this country.

Someone once said that the strength of a nation does not lie in the number of skyscrapers or big mansions or the style or design of its national dress or the number of cars that ply its streets. Instead, the strength of a nation resides primarily in the number of well-educated, well-cultured citizens it can boast. The launch of the National Inter-High School Debates is a giant step in building such a strong Nation. Therefore, I say congratulations to all of you for this patriotic endeavor.

Thank you very much.

May God bless us all.

