

A Review of OECS Education

The Subregional Dimension

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The Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS), comprising the nine small island states stretching from the British Virgin Islands in the north to Grenada in the south, are not newcomers to regionalism and regional cooperation (see appendix 2). These countries have been part of some federal structure for almost as long as their colonial history. In colonial times the groupings consisted of shifting combinations of islands labelled Leeward Islands or Windward Islands.

Contemporary OECS conception has effectively abolished the Leeward and the Windward Islands divisions and brought all the states together in a single grouping, although not all the ties or thinking associated with the old dichotomy have disappeared. It started with the Eastern Caribbean Currency Authority in March 1965, followed in 1968 with the establishment of the Eastern Caribbean Common Market, which had its secretariat in St. John's, Antigua. The Treaty of Basseterre of June 18, 1981, consolidated these and other subregional developments, bringing the OECS into being.

Before discussing educational development in the OECS over the last 15 years, it is very important to attempt to understand this subregion. Indeed, such understanding requires substantial adjustments to many tenets of conventional thinking. While all nine states could be classified as small, or even micro, individually and collectively they are by no means simple when viewed

from almost any perspective. Just a few examples of OECS complexity should suffice to illustrate this.

- The nine countries of the OECS consist of six independent countries and three British dependencies. The zone of cooperation in this subregion transcends political status of sovereignty or dependency.
- While all nine countries are classified as part of the English-speaking Caribbean, the people of St. Lucia and Dominica, by reason of their history and French-based Creole, have strong day-to-day relations with Martinique and Guadeloupe, which are departments of France and access many goods and services from these islands in the daily sea and air traffic between them.
- While BVI is a British dependency, its currency is the US dollar and its per capita income rivals that of the so-called Western industrial countries.
- While at one stage, the large countries classified themselves as more developed and the OECS countries as less developed, such a classification is no longer accurate, as several of the OECS countries have higher per capita income and expenditure than some of the larger Caribbean countries.
- The OECS has had a strong and successful monetary union, and the OECS dollar, which has been pegged to the US dollar at the same rate since July 1976, is probably the most stable currency in the region. Hence, while CARICOM has not yet reached the point of practical steps toward monetary union, the OECS could give the region technical advice on successful practice.
- In the Caribbean Examinations Council CSEC examinations, which is the Caribbean benchmark of successful completion of high schooling, three of the OECS countries, BVI, St Kitts and Nevis, and Montserrat have consistently ranked in the top five performing countries in the Caribbean over the past 15 years. These three countries along with Barbados enter a higher proportion of their age cohorts for CSEC, these students sit more

subjects per candidate, and obtain more subjects passed compared with entries than the rest of the region.

In thinking about the OECS, it would be very misleading to adopt a paradigm of deficit and deficiency, as the OECS manifests considerable strengths in several areas. More to the point is that even in the era in which the world adopted the nation-state paradigm and nationalism as the basis of all global relationships, the OECS practised some version or form of regionalism and regional cooperation, which transcended territorial limits. Further, the Caribbean and the world, in attempting to regionalize, are now moving in a zone that the OECS has always occupied, and with great success in some areas. The Caribbean, at least, has much to learn from the OECS about regionalism and regional cooperation. Many of the challenges of dealing with the OECS countries stem from using the nation-state and nationalism as the units of analysis or as the basis of organization and intervention.

Foundation for the Future

In October 1990 the ministers of education of OECS, which then had eight member states, decided to commission a long-term sub-regional education strategy to:

- Form the basis of national development
- Establish the framework for subregional initiatives
- Serve as the focal point of subregional cooperation in education
- Provide the broad parameters within which donor involvement and development cooperation would be sought

With Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) funding, a working group was established and mandated to develop the long-term strategy. This working group had one representative from each of the eight countries and was chaired by a Jamaican (Miller et al. 1991). The working group presented its report, *Foundation for the Future*, to the OECS Secretariat in

December 1991. Following review by the ministers of education and approval by the central authority (composed of prime ministers and chief ministers), Foundation for the Future (FFF) became the official long-term education strategy of the OECS.

Both the process the working group used to produce Foundation for the Future, and the process the Secretariat of the OECS used to ensure implementation, are very instructive.

Process to Develop Foundation for the Future

The elements of the process used to develop the Reform Strategy may be summarized as follows.

Analysis of the Education Systems of the Subregion

The working group analysed the education systems of the OECS countries by developing a conceptual framework consisting of six elements and nine perspectives.

The six elements were:

- The education of children, early childhood and primary schooling
- The education of adolescents, secondary schooling
- The education of adults—formal and nonformal programmes
- The terms and conditions of service of teachers
- The management and administration of education
- The financing of education

The nine perspectives were:

- Past reforms
- Current policies
- The legal basis of education
- Access and equity issues
- Efficiency and wastage issues
- Quality and effectiveness issues

- Technology and methodology practices
- Constraints
- Vision and mission

The six elements and nine perspectives constituted a conceptual matrix within which to establish and evaluate the current characteristics and features of the educational system of the eight OECS countries. This analysis was one means of identifying the strengths and weaknesses of education as it is currently organized and identifying issues and problems to be addressed in the reform process (Miller et al. 1991).

Interaction with Chief Education Officers of OECS Countries

The working group decided that throughout the period of the exercise it would interact with the chief education officers of the OECS countries for their inputs in developing the reform strategy. The chief education officers in effect served as sounding boards in the development of the strategy.

National Stakeholders Consultations

The working group visited each of the eight OECS countries, holding consultations with a broad cross-section of persons and interests in each country. The formula used for these national consultations was that the chairman plus two members of the group would visit each country. As far as possible, members from the Windward Islands visited the Leeward Islands and vice versa. The working group member resident in the country organized the consultations. Written comments were invited and received in several instances. Each national consultation was carried out over two or three working days.

The national consultations were rich sources of views and visions of the reform of education in the OECS. While diverse and conflicting views and recommendations were received, there were several areas of consensus. The national consultations also

gave evidence of specific initiatives being taken by one or two countries, which had implications for the entire subregion (Miller et al. 1991).

Commissioning of Literature and State-of-the Art Reviews

The working group commissioned state-of-the-art reviews on several aspects of education in order to benefit from the best available knowledge and information on those aspects of the operation of education systems. The following were the papers commissioned:

- Future Directions of Primary Education in the OECS
- Future Directions of Secondary Education in the OECS
- A Review of Reforms in Technical and Vocational Education
- A Review of Reforms in Tertiary Education
- The Statutory Organization of Education in the OECS Subregion
- Educational, Administrative and Management Reforms in Small Commonwealth States
- Demographic Projections for Eight OECS Countries
- International Migration and Schooling in the Eastern Caribbean
- Financing of Education in Most OECS Countries
- The Performance of Students from the OECS Countries in the CXC Examinations over the Period 1984 to 1990

Subregional Consultation with Experts in Education and Related Fields

The working group held a three-day subregional consultation. The participants were the authors of the reviews listed above, Caribbean experts in education, representatives of regional agencies active in the field of education, international agencies funding educational development in the Caribbean, and officials of

the Ministry of Education, Antigua, and of the Antigua State College. The authors of the reviews made presentations on their papers on the first two days of the consultation. On the third day the members of the working group suggested the broad outlines of the reform strategy that seemed to have emerged (Miller et al. 1991).

In a nutshell the process used by the working group to develop the education strategy for the OECS during the decade of the 1990s involved analyses of the education systems of the OECS countries from different perspectives by the working group itself; reviews of the best available knowledge on selected areas of education done by scholars of repute from the Caribbean and elsewhere; broad-based national consultations with stakeholders in the different countries; subregional consultation with experts and opinion leaders from the OECS and wider Caribbean; and interaction with the chief education officers of the countries of the subregion. As such, the process involved breadth and depth of interests and views; knowledge and expertise; and practical understanding of education in the subregion.

Process Used to Implement Foundation for the Future

The elements of the process used by the OECS Secretariat to move Foundation for the Future from paper to practice may be summarized briefly as follows:

- Acceptance and endorsement by the Council of Ministers of Education
- Approval by the central authority of the OECS, comprising heads of state of countries within the subregion
- Circulation of the Foundation of the Future document to all who had participated in the process by which it had been produced. As such, Foundation for the Future became one of the most widely circulated documents in education in the OECS.

- National consultations within the countries in which ministries of education and stakeholders had identified national priorities from among the approved strategies.
- Securing funding from CIDA and establishing the OECS Education Reform Unit (OERU) responsible for leading the implementation of the reforms across the subregion.

It was about four years from the time the Council of Ministers decided that a long-term education strategy should be developed, to the point when the OERU was established. The target date for implementing Foundation for the Future was 2000. Hence, the subregion had six years in which to actually implement the proposed reforms.

Reviewing the Implementation of Foundation for the Future

By 2000 there were three studies that attempted to review the implementation of Foundation for the Future in member countries. The three studies were the Department for International Development Caribbean (DFIDC) review, the ECERP review, and Miller et al. (2000). It is instructive to summarize and list the main findings of each of the three reviews.

DFIDC Review: Summary of the Main Findings

The DFIDC review examined the effectiveness and efficiency of the coordinating mechanisms as proposed and implemented in response to the last group of six strategies of Foundation for the Future, under the heading Reform Process.

The key issue for that review was to assess to what extent the current structure, function, and resources of the OERU were able to provide a level of service to member states to enable their improved performance in education. In addition, the review assessed the extent to which constraints and limitations on the capacity of the OERU were internal (relating to its own capacity)

or external (relating to the existence of conditions within the OECS member states).

The main findings of the review were as follows:

- All member states have adopted Foundation for the Future and remain committed to the reform process as evidenced in Policy Letters, Education Acts, loan commitments to fund basic education reform projects, and in recently drafted education sector development plans.
- The October 1999 OERU survey of the Status of Implementation of OECS Education Reform Initiatives provided a very useful audit and overview for OETEC and ministers' meetings to identify future priorities for development.
- All categories of stakeholders strongly support the continuation of subregional collaboration for progress beyond the reform process with a convincing rationale for continued co-operation between member states).
- There is little evidence to indicate that the reform process is as yet impacting on schools and classrooms to raise standards of student attainment. There is, therefore, a need to continue the reform in all states with a focused mechanism in place to support the process.
- The Education Reform Council, in the form of meetings of education ministers, provides an important forum for policy making. Concerns were expressed, however, that it has become a reporting body that is "routinized" and should refocus on policy issues and strategies to accelerate the reform process.
- There is strong support for the continuation and strengthening of OETEC's role. Similar concerns were expressed about the routine nature of its business, and a desire to see this committee taking a more proactive role in identifying priorities and development strategies to progress beyond the reform process. In this respect, it should make a strong contribution to the OERU Strategic Plan.

- National Education Advisory Councils exist in four states only. One of these has just been reconstituted and is in the process of defining its role. The other has existed for some years, and the chair reports that it has never been asked for advice nor given any to the minister. The other two are acting as PMCs. There is a need to reconsider whether the NEACs are the appropriate mechanisms for representing stakeholders within the reform process.
- Stakeholders perceive the OERU in several ways:
 - (a) To some it has become synonymous with ECERP. Since ECERP is a project, the OERU is also viewed as a project with some suggestion that Canadians drive the agenda.
 - (b) In the tertiary sector, the OERU is seen as the EDF tertiary Project. Many key stakeholders, including leaders of teachers' unions, reported that they were unaware of the existence of the OERU.
 - (c) Education reform activities are perceived as MOE activities, with principals and teachers unaware of the underpinning support from the OERU. Donor and funding agencies are equally unclear about the structure, role, and functions of the OERU as distinct from the projects it supports.
- There appears to be a clear need for the OERU to establish its identity and promote any added value that it brings to the reform process.
- It was reported that the gap in leadership of the OERU in 1997/98 led to an erosion of credibility. Care needs to be taken with future succession and continuity.
- The OERU has established a network of counterparts in MOEs and colleges for each initiative. The potential of this system for communication and implementation is considerable, but not yet fully operational. Several constraints exist, among which counterparts reported that:
 - (a) They had not been given a remit, and some had no perception of the role.

- (b) They saw the work for the OERU as extra, an addition to their MOE tasks.
 - (c) They did not operate as a team within the MOE, but rather as individuals, so they had no overview of ECERP or of each other's work. Meetings of counterparts in MOEs are infrequent. There is very little evidence that counterparts within the same initiative contact their colleagues in other states.
 - (d) They did not see themselves as an ERS implementation team.
- Communications between the stakeholders and OERU are seen as unsystematic. By and large, electronic systems of communication are not working. MOE systems are not yet robust, and only a limited number of officers and counterparts can access them.
 - Stakeholders reported frustration at the lack of follow-up with some OERU initiatives. For example, it was suggested that there should be more logical and systematic follow-up to the work that was started on programme budgeting and pooling of finances to gain purchasing power. This group last met in 1998.
 - Donor agencies and banks are meeting to attempt some coordination of funding for the reform process. At least one major agency has adopted an alternative reform strategy across member states and intends to compete for national funds to run activities. There is a case for the OERU to press for greater collaboration between regional agencies.
 - Overall, there is strong support for coordinating mechanisms and systems to facilitate the continuation of the reform process on a subregional basis, but an obvious reluctance to pay for the existing OERU from national funds unless there is clear and demonstrable value added. The OERU should develop a rigorous internal performance evaluation and make it available to stakeholders to demonstrate achievements.

ECERP: Some Lessons Learned

The purpose of the CIDA-funded project is to strengthen the capacity of Eastern Caribbean states to plan and implement education reform through subregional cooperation. The basic ECERP premise is that efforts at increasing subregional cooperation will bring forward quantitative savings in MOEs as well as qualitative long-term adjustments. In real terms ECERP has been the means by which the OECS Education Reform Unit (OERU) has been established.

The following summarizes some key lessons learned about project performance:

1. MOEs have difficulty developing concrete plans to address their fundamental management problems.
2. The required level of counterpart administrative support was not forthcoming, as ECERP responsibilities have merely been added to existing staff workloads. It was, therefore, extremely difficult for them to execute additional work without great personal sacrifice. Remuneration was also expected, because of precedents from other externally funded projects.
3. The initial structure envisaged to coordinate the reform strategy (the IRC) focused on project development and management, and provided no forum for the subregion to study and recommend common policy issues. The newly formed OETEC, replacing the IRC, will assume a broader role, emphasizing policy, as opposed to project management issues.
4. The numerous activities undertaken through the various externally funded projects have led to planning difficulties for the individual states.
5. By the end of 1997–1998, the pace of ECERP disbursements was well below target. It was felt that two additional years would probably be required to realize project objectives. With a full staff complement at the OERU, and with project activities more focused, the pace of activities picked up in 1998–1999. It now appears that project duration will be as originally scheduled.

Main Findings of the 2000 Assessment (Miller et al.)

From the information received from the national assessment reports and the clarifications made at the Antigua workshop in July 2000, the following general conclusions appear warranted:

1. There are many strategies and components of strategies that five or more of the countries have implemented to some extent.
2. There are also a significant number of strategies that five or more of the nine countries have not implemented.
3. Areas in which there is a high degree of implementation of reforms include early childhood and primary education and the mechanism for implementing the reform process.
4. Areas in which there is a relatively low to modest degree of implementation of reforms include the harmonization of systems, terms and conditions of service of teachers, and the financing of education.

Appendix 2 provides a comprehensive statement of member states' degree of implementation of the various strategies. It does not address the extent to which individual states have undertaken the strategy, but rather, the geographic spread of action taken on the initiative by member states.

The assessment of progress in the implementation of FFF strategies underlined the following very clearly:

1. Countries not only agreed to undertake the challenges of implementing FFF, but all countries in the subregion engaged in some action to implement at least some of the strategies included in the strategic framework. Given the high rate of failure of education reforms in several other parts of the world, the fact that countries followed through with effective action in many areas of the reform indicated commitment to education reform within the subregion.
2. FFF did not set a time frame for the attainment of actions set out in the strategies. It took almost three years from the acceptance of FFF by the central authority before the OERU was

established and funded. In effect, implementation of FFF at the country level has taken place over a six-year period. Given the lethargy that often surrounds education reform, the extent of the overall implementation of actions contained in the strategies and components since 1994 has been quite remarkable.

3. Action was taken on a wide range of strategies or components of strategies. All member states had implemented some of the elements of FFF. Some countries had achieved substantial or limited implementation, while others had actually achieved certain goals, and yet others had plans in place for achieving them.
4. Notwithstanding the uneven implementation of the strategies and components of strategies (partly because some member states concentrated on strategies or components high on their national priority list), it is possible to identify areas in which there was a high degree of implementation from five or more countries.

One most important point is that more strategies of Foundation for the Future were implemented through governments' independent action than through collective subregional action through the OERU. In their Party Manifestos, political parties included reform strategies suggested by the Foundation, often without acknowledging the source. Having been successful in the electoral process, those parties followed through by implementing reforms based on these strategies. In effect, educational reform implemented in OECS countries in the decade of the 1990s was based on Foundation for the Future proposals through both collective subregional action as well as independent actions taken by ministries within the generally agreed subregional framework for educational reform.

Pillars for Partnership and Progress

In 2000, Foundation for the Future was superseded by Pillars for Partnership and Progress, the new long-term educational strategy for the OECS until 2010. Pillars for Partnership and Progress did

not simply take up the unfinished agenda of Foundation for the Future, but also took account of the new imperatives for education reform that had emerged in the decade of the 1990s, including the following:

- *Knowledge management*: A critical imperative identified by the Caribbean Education Strategy 2020 was that of narrowing the knowledge gap. The rise of a global knowledge-based economy has created a basis for inequality among nations. Knowledge has been elevated in status to a factor of production, and the capacity of countries to manage knowledge will be a determinant of their degree of competitiveness. The challenge for the education system is to develop mechanisms for acquiring, generating, disseminating, and utilizing knowledge—in short, to play a lead role in the transformation into a learning society. The implication of this is a whole new paradigm involving applied research, flexibility in curriculum design, innovation in instructional delivery, and multi- and interdisciplinary approaches to learning, among other imperatives.
- *Affective development*: Accelerated social decline fuelled by the rise of the drug culture and reflected in the demise of family and community structures has accentuated the need for the education system to play a more definitive role in the affective development of students. Greater prominence is now being given to the inculcation of attitudes, values, and behaviours appropriate to the “Ideal Caribbean Person,” through the achievement of social skills such as conflict resolution to ensure peaceful coexistence in a multicultural society. The growing marginalization of young Caribbean males is also an important trend that must be taken into account, and appropriate interventions aimed at gender sensitization and role modelling be developed.
- *Incorporation of information technology in education*: The emergence of new technologies of information with their tremendous learning potential is poised to revolutionize our ways and conditions of learning. The use of these technologies in

education can help transform our classrooms to learner-centred spaces and will facilitate the provision of quality instruction at a distance. The potential for adult and continuing education and the cost-effectiveness of that modality cannot be overlooked.

- *Reduction of inequity and mitigation of poverty in the education system:* Notwithstanding the relatively extensive provision of educational opportunities by OECS member states, there is evidence of inequity in provision that needs to be addressed. Evidence from emerging research suggests that factors such as hunger, inadequate access to school texts, and domestic conditions have a strong impact on student learning and achievement. If education is to help eradicate poverty, attention must be paid to this situation, and appropriate poverty mitigation measures ought to be put in place.

In summary, it is fair to say that the process of assessing the implementation of Foundation for the Future in the nine OECS countries revealed a higher degree of action than was the general perception from any single perspective or experience. In very crude terms, more than 50 percent of the 65 strategies were implemented to some degree over the six-year period from 1994 to 2000. While this is impressive, much more remained to be done not only in terms of the outstanding commitments with respect to FFF but also with respect to the emerging new challenges that were not addressed by FFF. Pillars for Partnership and Progress, therefore, continue the reform process commenced by FFF, but goes beyond it in facing the new challenges and circumstances.

Concluding Comment

Under the aegis of the OECS, the nine small countries of the Eastern Caribbean have continued their long history of subregional cooperation. In education, that has taken the form of

sharing a common framework for education reform that allows nine countries to harmonize their education systems and provide education for their populations along similar lines. In this regard the OECS members are ahead of their CARICOM partners. This is of particular relevance within the context of the emergence of the Caribbean Single Market and Economy (CSME). In many respects the rest of the region could learn much from the OECS from their efforts to work within a common long-term strategy for education.

For the OECS itself, 2006 is past the midterm in implementing Pillars for Partnership and Progress. A midterm review may well be in order.

ECERP Eastern Caribbean Education Reform Project

MOE Ministry of Education

IRC

Appendix 2
Foundations for the Future Review
Strategies, by Degree of Implementation

Strategies

(continued)

29. Reorganize [VEI]

continued

NOTE

1. Education for All Goals and Targets: 2000–2015—Caribbean Region.

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