

Statement by H.E. Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf  
President of Liberia and Visitor of Liberia's State Universities  
At Launch of Government of Liberia's Financial Aid Program  
For Students in Discipline of Education  
At the University of Liberia and Tubman University  
October 15, 2010

President Emmet Dennis;

Faculty and Staff;

Dear Students:

It is always a pleasure to escape the confines of my office and visit with students – the bedrock, and the future, of our blessed country.

My many visits to the campuses of the University of Liberia, and the ever increasing financial and moral support rendered by our administration, are evidence of the high performance expectations I envisage from this student body.

You are here because you know the importance of getting an education; because you know that to be whatever you want to be, you must place emphasis on acquiring the knowledge that will enable you to achieve your objectives. The value of education is something that nobody can ever take from you.

With you staying the course, and making the most of your educational opportunities, the day will come when Liberia will no longer need a Poverty Reduction Strategy because educated people like you will have lifted our country out of poverty.

Our policy of free primary education has created a yearning for enlightenment by our children and by their parents who, until very recently, could not afford to send their children to school.

When we came into office in January 2006, we faced the brutal realization that there were only 50 Liberian doctors for a population of some 3.5 million people. We therefore revived an earlier policy of free education for those pursuing a degree in medicine, as well as free paramedical education. We hope to attract more of our bright students to this indispensable healing profession.

Let me tell you why I am here today. Recently, when results of the WAEC exam and the University of Liberia entrance exam were published, the results were shocking. I agonized over the high failure rates among students taking these exams. Only one – I repeat, only one – out of the thousands of students who sat the WAEC exam ranked in the first category. And as if that weren't bad enough, only 6,000 of the 23,000 students who took the University's entrance exam were successful. Let me admit, candidly, that I don't know where the University would have put them had all 23,000 candidates passed the entrance exam!

It is clear that the root cause of these high failure rates is the lack of enough qualified teachers in our elementary and high schools.

When we checked the number of students enrolled in education programs at our public universities, we were alarmed that, of the more than 21,000 students at UL, for example, only about 800 were enrolled in its Teachers College, even though the UL figure is higher than the combined enrollment in education at private colleges. But that is small comfort. We cannot afford to produce teachers at such a low rate, in such meager numbers, especially when the need is so grave.

We quickly recognized that we had to do something to reverse these disquieting statistics. We have therefore decided to introduce an incentive to encourage more students to enter the noble teaching profession.

For the 2010/2011 academic year, and with immediate effect, all students enrolled in the Teachers College of the University of Liberia and the College of Education at Tubman University are hereby placed on the Government's Financial Aid Program, which will pay their tuition and fees, and include a small monthly stipend for those not already on Government's payroll. We hope to continue this assistance in the coming years and up to your graduation.

What we require, in return, is for you to teach in our public schools for two years. I hope that you will consider this. Fair enough?

This follows the precedent for this type of incentive – at TNIMA. In March, we graduated 206 healthcare professionals. In return for three years of free education, these graduates are today fulfilling a commitment to serve wherever the Government assigns them. That is the model we envisage for graduates of our Teachers Colleges.

The measure we are announcing today is another of our endeavors to improve access to quality education, without which all efforts to raise our people out of poverty will come to naught. I urge you, to take full advantage of this compelling opportunity.

I thank you.