

Remarks by H.E. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
At Official Signing Ceremony of the Education Reform Act of 2011
William V.S. Tubman High School, Sinkor
Monday, August 8, 2011

(Delivered extemporaneously and transcribed)

Partners of Liberia, Tubman High is back!

Senator [Blamo] Nelson was called to come and make some remarks. As he stood up, he leaned over me and said, "I'm not on the program, what will I say?" I said, talk about the good educational things happening in Grand Kru County.

But he came, and he told you all about what's in the Act. He went beyond that to make all these commitments, about computers in their schools. He'd better come back; he has to work, and pass the budget!

There are so many good things about this Act. In the early years of this Administration, we struggled with poor WAEC [West African Examinations Council] Exam scores; volunteer teachers, well-intentioned but lacking the capability to teach our children at the proper level; poor compensation and logistics for teachers.

When Dr. Gongar [Education Minister Othello Gongar] took over, following his predecessor, he began to struggle with those things. He said, wait a minute; we need to go back to look at the very Act that set the educational system, and we need to start from there, before we can begin to build and change and

reform all of these things. And that's how we started the Act till this time. But let me say: Another fundamental is in place!

Another good thing about it is the role played by the Governance Commission. Here they are: Dr. [Amos] Sawyer is here, and all of his colleagues are over there. Decentralization is something they've been promoting, been talking about. Today, our health system is fairly well decentralized; you've got Health Ministry Offices all over the counties. The Agriculture Ministry is also in the process of decentralizing. As you go around, they are setting up Agriculture Regional Offices all over the country.

This Act enables the education system to become even more decentralized by putting authority in the hands of those in the community who are responsible for education. We did not say devolution of power yet, but it is moving in that direction. And what it means is that power does belong with the people and, eventually, through our fiscal system, our educational system, and all of our sector systems, as we began to move away from the center to the periphery and give them the responsibility, and the authority, and the mandate to empower themselves to enable them to make their contribution. That's what decentralization is all about. And on that path, another element of the fundamental through the Education Act is in place.

I am so glad to hear the Ambassador talk about the retention of girls in school, and one of the things we've been talking about is Free Compulsory Primary Education. We noticed that the Act carries this one step further: not Free Compulsory Primary Education but now Free Compulsory Basic Education, which means all of our schools are going to be free right up to the ninth grade.

What that means is that we have a better opportunity to keep those girls, keep all the young people, but particularly the girls, who have been falling behind because they've been dropping out right after primary school and all of us need to put an effort into it to stop teenage pregnancy, to stop the assault on our young girls.

Families, parents must take responsibility, as well as teachers and preachers. We must go back to those old days when everyone feels responsible for that child in your home or that child next door, to make sure that they get the opportunity to be a professional. Another girl has to follow me sometime down the road. Let us not deny them that opportunity to reach their potential, and education is what does it for them.

We are very pleased and want to thank all of you in the Education Ministry all the teachers around the country who have contributed, all of our partners who have supported it, to be able to get this Education Act passed, which we'll be signing today.

And let me say to our friends out there: It had been sanitized with the removal of that objectionable clause. To our pastors, we have an Act where it's acceptable to all. So that basic fundamental is also in place.

I thank all of you for being here and for contributing to it.