

**Address by H.E. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
at the First Commencement Convocation
of the Grand Bassa Community College (GBCC)
on “Fulfilling the Dream”
Paynesberry, Grand Bassa County
Saturday, April 27, 2013**

All Protocol has been overly observed.

The holding of today’s Commencement Convocation here in Paynesberry, and seeing, first-hand, the new campus of the Grand Bassa Community College as it rises up, is proof, as if any were needed, that when you dream big – as I mentioned the last time we spoke here – and are prepared to make the required sacrifices – dreams do come true.

You, the people of Grand Bassa County – the county leadership, the educators, the parents, but especially the youth – dreamed of, and demanded, an institution of your own – one that would, for the first time, build the capacity of young people of this county beyond high school.

It shall be a dream come true, dear friends, when the idyllic, 250-acre campus comes to life, in September, abuzz with energy and excitement, a beacon for youths throughout the region, an environment where people can come to be educated, so that when they leave this place of higher learning, they will apply the knowledge they have acquired, in this special place, for the transformation of their community, their county, their nation and the world.

Graduations are, indeed, special; a time when we gather, as educators and students, family and well-wishers, to celebrate the achievements of our children or other relatives, having reached an all-important milestone in their lives. We celebrate because the value and the importance of education is really the cornerstone of the development of any nation, most especially a post-conflict country. For this reason, we are all here, delighted in joining you, joining these students who are coming to this great milestone, congratulating them as they embark upon the next stage of their life’s journey, be it for further studies or a career.

Many of us here know the genesis of this College; it was established as the result of the overwhelming cry by the youths of Grand Bassa to their county leaders, to their legislators, to the administration for this institution of higher learning. We know that they all responded – all of us jointly – through chartering the Community College, on June 11, 2008, as passed by the Legislature and subsequently signed into law by me.

We want to commend the leadership of Grand Bassa County – the Legislature and the Executive – for your strong leadership and persistence in getting this College started, allocating both County and Social Development Funds towards fulfilling the dream.

I thank Dr. [Levi] Zangai [President of Grand Bassa Community College] for mentioning the administration’s support for the first US\$600,000 that was put in; but that’s not all. As the former Superintendent says, we gave Grand Bassa the first road, in our commitment to be able to connect all of the capitals, and we deserve a clap for that! We also have heard recognition of those who made

contribution – Oderbrecht, ArcelorMittal, Buchanan Renewable Energies – some of them still operating and some have gone on to other things.

Education is the key to transformation, so if our national leadership wants quality professionals, we must work to go beyond what we emphasize here today. A house, built on a weak foundation, cannot stand. And so we are going to be putting emphasis on primary and secondary schools, to provide the quality that will lead to where you are, in Grand Bassa Community College.

Let me share a few sobering statistics with you: there are 210,290 students enrolled in 1,593 public primary schools in Liberia. This doesn't include the mission schools, and it doesn't include private schools. Grand Bassa has 91 of them, with an enrolment of 11,510. Among the national public primary school student body, there are 193,211 students overage; Grand Bassa has 10,946 of overage students, 95.1% of its enrolment. Of the 9,655 public primary school teachers nationwide, 3,719 are trained; the qualifications of 37.5% of them are unknown.

I am saying all this to say that we have to go back to fundamentals. We have to make sure that when these students leave, they can compete anywhere: they can compete in the nation, they can compete in their continent, they can compete in the world.

Representative Smith made a statement the other day about water, and the fact that we need to do more. In Grand Bassa, out of 91 schools, only 19 have access to clean water. I take it the County Development Fund will address that problem.

You may recall, in a recent statement I made some unsavory remarks about the education system. And so we are going to fix it. One of the immediate things we have planned to do is to hold a day-long Education Roundtable, scheduled for next Friday, May 3rd, in Monrovia.

There is an integrated web of problems facing the education sector, and they must be addressed if Liberia's development challenges are to be attended to. Many education professionals agree that children should have access to quality education within an equitable system; that schools should place emphasis on children's rights, especially girls' rights, where injustices are challenged and the lives of beneficiaries transformed.

By getting quality education, our youths are likely to acquire the knowledge and confidence to make use of information gleaned to improve their lives. The dignity and self-confidence gained can help to challenge discriminatory and biased gender roles and relations. We also know that education can provide students with the confidence they need to help reduce maternal and child mortality, violence, and HIV/AIDS transmission. In the end, good quality education is a catalyst to achieving the requisite economic growth required to tackle poverty, inequality, and to compete regionally and globally.

In organizing the Education Roundtable – to which we hope all educators here will be a part – our government is fully aware of the difficult circumstances facing the sector – our schools, our vocational institutions, our colleges, our universities and, ultimately, our emerging democracy. The government believes that these challenges should be impetus for bringing together all stakeholders in the education sector to develop a highly focused framework to guide policy makers and practitioners. The Roundtable should be able to evaluate current policies, expenditures, realize efficiencies,

leverage resources, prioritize strategies, and make critical investments to bring about the student achievement outcomes which the nation desires.

Bridging the education gap between Liberia and its immediate neighbors, moving us from a special WAEC Exam to the general WAEC Exam, is an imperative. This is to be achieved by us all working closely together with our development partners, with friends of Liberia, with multilateral organizations, the private sector, community-based organizations and, more importantly, parents, to ensure that our goals related to education are fully met.

Now, having said all that – which you haven't listened to anyway – let me express thanks and deep appreciation to the Trustees, President, Faculty, Administrators and Staff of GBCC for your dedication, your leadership and your vision in guiding this institution to where it is today, and to where we know it will be in the future. We thank all of you who have made the sacrifice to come here and make this College a reality. Under your able leadership, Dr. Zangai and your associates, student enrollment has grown to 804, with a ratio of 40 percent female to 60 percent male. We must work to make it 50-50. That's part of our commitment.

What I find particularly pleasing is that this Graduating Class is making history. There will never be another "First Commencement Convocation of Grand Bassa Community College," because all 138 of you have been a part of this first, having already collected your Associate degrees and your Certificates and Diplomas in a short while. You are the first; everyone will follow your footsteps! You have to set the example in moving on to the next step, as you prepare yourselves for professionalism.

Government's priority right now is the rehabilitation of our country's energy and transport infrastructure – in other words, power, roads and ports. We say so because we know we cannot get you a quality education if you don't have reliable power to be able to access the internet, if you don't have good roads. And I hope, now that the road is here, Bassonians living in Monrovia will come back here to teach at GBCC.

Graduation is all about the economy! The existence of GBCC will contribute to the economy because trained young people, remaining in the county and working with businesses and the concessionaires that are opening up, will contribute to our overall economic growth and to per capita income. It will contribute to the development of our infrastructure as those educated and with skills will settle here, build homes here, raise their families here.

I wish to congratulate you, the Graduating Class, on behalf of the Government, and in my own name. We call upon you to do the best to move on. We will follow up on Dr. Zangai's appeal to some of the partners here, to make sure not only that you continue to assist in their training, which many of you do, but that you partner with the government to make sure that GBCC has what it needs – in teachers, in equipment, in facilities and in resources – so that this graduating class tomorrow will lead our country to a much bigger and brighter future.

Thank you.