



The following speech was delivered by the Minister of Education, Youth and Culture, the Hon Maxine Henry Wilson, at the Opening Ceremony of the “Children & the Internet Releasing Potential: Minimising Risks” Conference and Celebration event on March 31, 2005

Ladies and Gentlemen: Good morning

Regrettably, I cannot be physically present at the conference table with you this morning, but thanks to the power of technology, I can be in two places at the same time. A plus for you is that you can switch me off at any time.

I welcome all our local and international partners as well as other participants to our beautiful island and hope that to you will take some time to tour and bask in the natural luxury and splendour of this our country, Jamaica.

Much value is added when you can bring together a diverse range of individuals from different sectors to focus on the future of our nation — our young children. I therefore thank Cable and Wireless, Cable and Wireless Jamaica Foundation, the British Council, Childnet International and all the other contributors for organising this international conference in an effort to help make the Internet a powerful reservoir, yet a safe place for children.

I congratulate the winners of the Childnet Academy Competition as well as the students who have just shared the wealth of experience they have garnered while interfacing with Information and Communication Technologies.

There is no denying the impact Information and Communication Technology is having on the world. ICT has influenced all countries' economic growth, employment in many ways: It has changed the conditions of industrial development; the structure of the demand for skills, and possibly the relationship between expanding production and employment; and by rapidly improving information flows, it has created a borderless society.

For us to compete in this global village, we have to develop a highly skilled and educated workforce with aptitudes and skills in the application of information and communication technologies. This has implications for our teaching and learning environment. Research has shown that ICT can provide teachers and learners with improved learning opportunities through a variety of ways **including:**

- Enabling online teamwork for increased participation, collaboration and information sharing through the use of email, the Web and other remote collaboration tools.
- Enabling the rapid creation and inexpensive distribution of educational information and knowledge.
- Allowing each student to learn at his/her level and speed thereby giving pupils greater control over their own learning.

I believe the greatest thing about this technology-driven society is that our children — the Millennium kids — are very comfortable with and motivated by the technology. It is not difficult therefore to capitalise on their passion in getting them — particularly the boys — to learn.

Recommendations from our National Task Force Report on Education resonate with this thinking, and emphasis has been placed on using ICT as means through which issues of equity, quality and access as well as literacy and functional problems can be attacked.

Even before this however, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Culture had emphasised the strategic deployment of Information and Communication Technologies in education, as a means of transforming our society into one that is knowledge-based and globally competitive. This is a position that has been clearly enunciated in the 2001 strategic plan of action, and forms the basis of the seventh strategic objective: to enhance student learning by the greater use of information and communication technology as preparation for life in the national and global communities.

The Government's position on ICT development is even more clearly defined in its Policy for ICT in Education and describes a framework for further development of strategic objectives, targets, guidelines and standards for the use of technology in education.

We have made significant strides in providing primary and secondary schools with needed hardware and software as well as providing in-service and pre-service training for our teachers in computer skills, and most critically in the skills of meaningfully integrating the ICTs into teaching and learning. We are also ensuring that all school leavers are computer literate, thereby providing them with the necessary ICT skills to become employable in the market place.

Much of the provisions for the technology have been made possible through key partnerships with both local and international agencies and through the generosity and vision of our own private sector and I want to thank them for their continued support.

Under the Government of Jamaica/EduNet Programme, for example, we have placed at least one computer in 983 schools and provided training for teachers to assist them in meeting the needs of the students. We have since expanded beyond that to equip several of our secondary schools with state of the art computer labs and I wish to acknowledge the significant contribution that Cable & Wireless Jamaica has made in this venture by providing free Internet access to our primary and secondary schools under the Classmate programme

The New Horizons for Primary Schools, a GOJ-USAID funded project has reaped a significant measure of success by focussing on improving literacy and numeracy through technology in 72 schools.

This programme has provided basic IT competencies for an additional 500 teachers in technology integration into the Revised Primary Curriculum at those schools.

Our National Training Agency — HEART/NTA — has added to its wealth of ICT interventions and programmes, the establishment of ICT clinics across the island aimed at developing a cadre of skilled video producers, web page developers, desktop publishers who are trained to participate in the production of culturally relevant, locally produced multi-media instructional materials, for use by the nation's learners.

The Ministry's website is now structured to provide resources for parents, teachers, students and other stakeholders. All agencies of the MOEYC are linked to this website. Currently, the most often visited resource on the website are the pages containing the Revised Primary Curriculum. This tells us that many of our parents — given the resources — are willing to provide home-based support for their children's learning.

I believe however that our most ambitious undertaking to date is the impending introduction of E-Learning to assist us in improving the quality of our secondary education. This is a joint project between Ministries of Education and Commerce and Technology. It will utilise instructional technologies to provide access to the instructional materials generated under various programmes to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of both teachers and students in our secondary school system.

The project will re-purpose existing materials and develop new high quality instructional materials for teachers and students in eleven subjects, including English Language and Mathematics. Instructional materials for both teachers and students will be packaged in a variety of digital formats such as compact discs and DVDs. Materials for teachers will be developed based on international best practices to facilitate multimedia presentations in the classroom and our master teachers in the system will be deployed to present lecture series that will be recorded in digital formats and packaged on DVDs and other appropriate media.

These are just a few examples and of course we have been learning valuable lessons about integrating the technology, some of which Mrs Jackie Cousins will mention in her presentation.

I can assure you that with continued emphasis on partnerships and investment in information and communication technology, the education system should see real changes.

Having said all of that, ladies and gentlemen: I wish to point out that the Internet is full of remarkable information and knowledge, but full of fiction and rumour masquerading as wisdom, too. Once every child has access to the Internet, that child will be free to surf. And when that happens, the schools and the parents will have to do many things, including ensuring that what is learnt is wholesome and factual and ought to be learnt.

How do you prevent them from surfing into the undesirables? How do you help them to discard much of the garbage and toxins that they have already picked up while surfing this wonderful Worldwide Web and still allow them the right to independent and critical thinking? I believe this is a challenge that Childnet International will be addressing later on and I am looking forward to continued dialogue in adopting your Kidsmart programme in our schools.

I wish you all the best in this conference and hope you will achieve your goal of reviewing the opportunities for developing an integrated education and awareness programme for Jamaica — not just for schools but for parents too. You have my wholehearted support on that.

I thank you!