Basic Schools in Jamaica to Benefit from Jamaica 50

Early childhood education is set to receive a significant boost with the implementation of the Jamaica 50 Campaign by the philanthropic organisation, Food for the Poor (FFP).

The initiative will entail the construction and refurbishing of some 50 of the island’s basic schools, over a 50-month period, at a cost of approximately $150 million. It is being undertaken as the organisation’s contribution and gift to commemorate Jamaica’s 50th anniversary of independence.

The Jamaica 50 Campaign was officially launched on June 13, during a ground-breaking ceremony for construction of the new High House Basic School in St. Catherine, one of the early childhood institutions targeted to benefit from the undertaking.

High House Basic School, which currently has 27 registered pupils and is staffed by three teachers, including Principal, Rosalyn Gayle, has been selected as the first institution on which work will start, as the existing building has fallen into a state of disrepair.

The new school is being built on lands donated by the Agro Industry Corporation (AIC), and will include classrooms, a staff room, kitchen, bathroom facilities, and a recreational area.

Outlining project details, Food for the Poor’s Chairman, Andrew Mahfood, said work on the first three institutions, inclusive of High House Basic School, is slated to be completed in time for them to be opened when the 2012/13 academic year commences in September. He informed that, thereafter, one school will be opened each month for the ensuing 50 months.

Some 29 schools have been identified for assistance under the project, and are situated in Kingston, St. Catherine, St. Thomas, Manchester, Portland, St. Ann, St. James and Westmoreland.

“The basic schools will be built in communities where the Early Childhood Commission (ECC), in consultation with Food for the Poor, has identified the most dire needs for pre-primary facilities,” he said.

Mr. Mahfood advised that the Jamaica 50 Campaign will also entail the training of some 500 basic school teachers over a five-year period, beginning September.

“Food for the Poor will be providing scholarships to teachers who need to upgrade their qualifications, but lack the financial resources to do so. We will disburse 50 teacher’s scholarships every September and January for the next five years,” he noted.

Welcoming the gesture by Food for the Poor, Education Minister, Rev. the Hon. Ronald Thwaites, described the initiative as an “extraordinary gift to Jamaica,” adding that the 50 institutions will get “the full support of the Government of Jamaica."

He also welcomed FFP’s focus on teacher training, pointing out that this is important in ensuring the total educational development of their pupils, and encouraged more investments by other stakeholders in early childhood education.

For her part, ECC Chairman, Professor Maureen Samms-Vaughn, described the project as the “consolidation of a partnership between Food for the Poor, Early Childhood Commission and the Ministry of Education”.

This collaboration, she contended, would ensure that the children are provided with a high quality environment and safe and secure buildings in which to learn, and highly trained teachers who are knowledgeable about the developmental needs of young children.

Professor Samms-Vaughn said the ECC has had a longstanding relationship with FFP, pointing out that during the course of this association, the organisation has been exemplary.

“Food for the Poor has chosen to support early childhood development as a priority. I am sure the choice was a carefully made one, based on the knowledge that early childhood development is the pillar on which our social development, our health, and our educational infrastructure is built,” she argued

Against this background, Professor Samms-Vaughn said in order for the inputs of FFP and other stakeholders to yield

rich dividends for the children, it is important for their parents, and the communities, to play their part in providing the best environments in which they can learn.

“If we work together at this, then all the children in this (High House) community and others will have a very bright future,” she said.