

The Coalition for Education Reform

Nassau, Bahamas

Bahamian Youth – The Untapped Resource

Report No. 2

September 2007

The Bahamian Youth Project is a

three-year effort to define the education crisis in the Bahamas and propose reform. The crippling shortage of qualified Bahamians to fill jobs triggered this initiative by the unions and private sector leadership who worked as the Coalition for Education Reform.

The Project looked at data from the Bahamas General Certificate of Secondary Education exams for 2004 thru 2006. In the process it changed its focus from the “D” average scores earned by all school leavers in 26 subjects to student proficiency in the English Language and Mathematics, skills commonly associated with Literacy, and the male disengagement from education. In so doing the Project defined a societal failure of immense consequences.

Furthermore, in June 2005 the Project proposed concrete proposals that would start the process of reform. It concluded that reform would only occur if the “education” bureaucracy, the teachers’ union, politicians and the broader community supported this great endeavor.

Somehow the country has to shake its resistance to make hard decisions. Failure to do so means lower economic growth and increased social instability.

The Coalition relied on the expertise of its members and also conferred with highly regarded educators and senior managers of human resources. Ralph J Massey, an economist, was retained to do research and prepare the reports.

The Coalition for Education Reform includes the following:

1. Bahamas Chamber of Commerce
2. National Congress of Trade Unions
3. Bahamas Employers Confederation
4. Bahamas Hotel Association
5. Bahamas Hotel Catering & Allied Workers Union
6. Bahamas Hotel Employers Association
7. Nassau Tourism Development Board

September 25, 2007

Nassau, Bahamas

This is the second report by the Coalition for Education Reform on the crisis in education in the Bahamas. It will examine that crisis in two steps...the challenge and the response.

The Challenge

In late 2004 a group of Bahamians, a broad section of business and union leaders, discussed the scarcity of Bahamian school leavers prepared to enter the workforce. The demand for sufficiently prepared Bahamian job candidates simply exceeded the supply. That was true in 2004 and is even more pressing today.

This realization led to the formation of the Coalition for Education Reform, a group of organizations that includes the --

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After months of research and editing the Coalition produced the 22-page report, ***Bahamian Youth: The Untapped Resource***.¹ The Coalition submitted it to the Minister of Education in May 2005 in connection with the 18th National Education Conference. It was a response to his national call for Papers on “Transforming Bahamian Education for the 21st Century”. The Ministry published it with nine other papers. Unfortunately, it received only a limited private distribution.

¹ For the complete text please refer to the websites of the Bahamas Chamber of Commerce (thebahamaschamber.com), the Bahamas Employers Confederation (bahamasemployers.org) and the Bahamas Hotel Association (bhahotels.com)

Separately the Coalition distributed its report widely to civic leaders in 2006 along with a TV documentary and speeches to civic groups; and in March 2007 it presented it to the Education Research Forum of the College of the Bahamas.

The present efforts are now directed to promoting those policies that will adequately respond to controversies like the recent one at C V Bethel High School when “fewer than half of the 400 students graduated with a diploma.”

What is the problem?

Pass or Fail

Students on leaving the 93 public and private secondary schools are judged on the evaluations of their teachers who grade both classroom participation and the results of their tests.

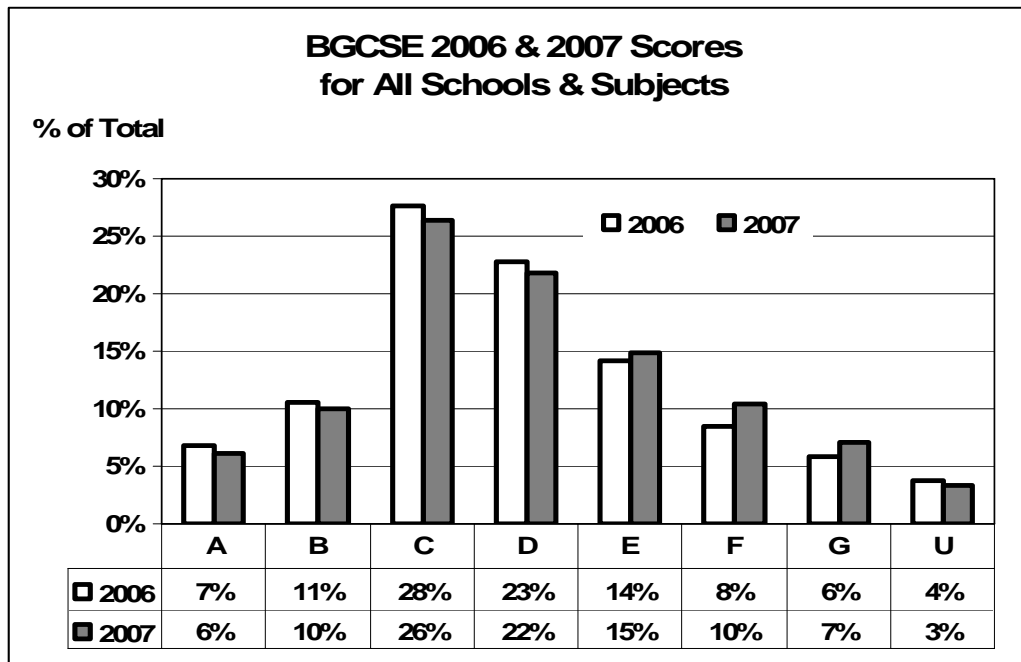
- In the case of the public schools, the Department of Education does not have a system that captures this data since grading is decentralized. It is the responsibility of the individual principal although in practice a common methodology is used; and
- Generally the schools use a 4-point grading scale that awards 4 points for an “A”, 3 points for a “B” 2 points for a “C”, one point for a “D”. Every grade below a “D” gets a zero in the determination whether a student earns or does not earn a diploma.

But...the Department of Education does test students during the third, sixth, ninth and 11-12th grades. The last in that series is the Bahamas General Certificate of Secondary Education (“BGCSE”) examination that tests school leavers from both public and private high schools.

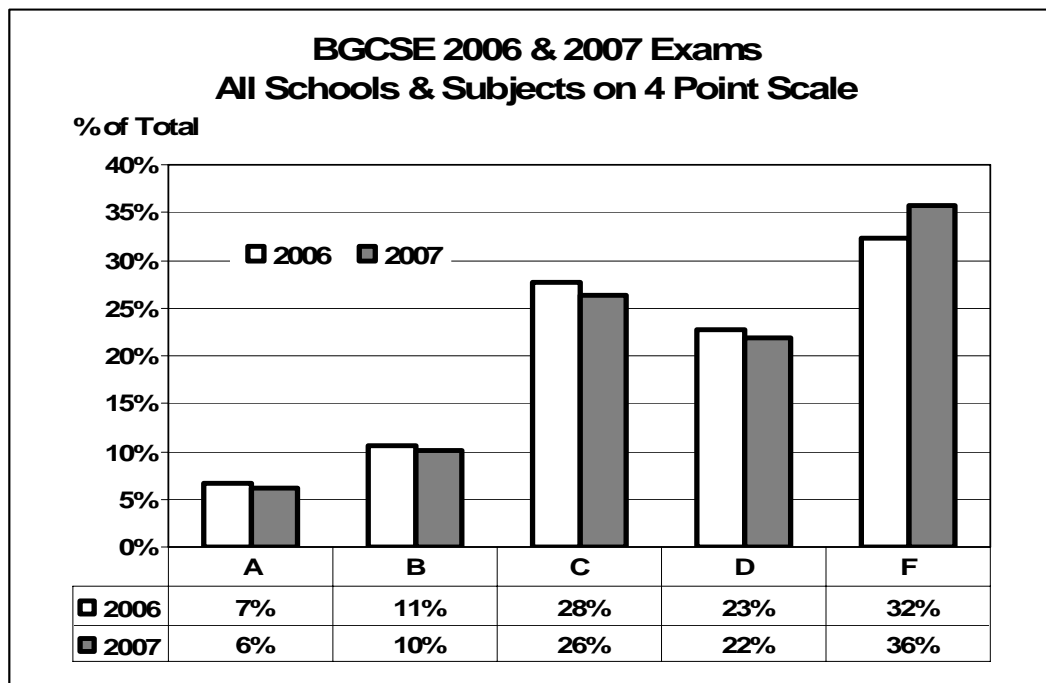
In 2006 23,063 BGCSE exams were written in 26 subjects with the English Language and Mathematics tests being written in the greatest numbers. Students are urged to write exams in five subjects.

The first graph on the following page shows the 2006 and 2007 BGCSE Examination scores that look like what one would expect. There is a peak score at a “C” and the “curve” rises to that point and declines thereafter. However, the graph presents a misleading picture of normalcy.

While the Department of Education does not compile “graduation” data for all schools, we can modify the BGCSE results as shown to the right to get a picture of the actual results.



We can do this by applying the four-point grading scale to the BGCSE data. The exams written at the “E”, “F”, “G” and “U” level earn a zero and their amounts are added together to get a new “F” as follows:



For all 93 public and private schools and for all 26 subjects in 2007 -

- 6% of all exam takers got “As” and 36% got “Fs” and an “F” clearly means “FAILURE” as it appears to the high school principal.
- The peak grade in the distribution is not a “C” but an “F” and the average grade for 2007 was a “D minus”.

But...this graph is just the first step in defining the crisis.

The English Language

Most companies screen new job candidates using various interview techniques, background checks and competency tests to determine their suitability for employment.

One set of important basic qualifications relates to a candidate’s linguistic and numerical skills. The Coalition examined the BGCSE exam results to better understand the scarcity of qualified job candidates.

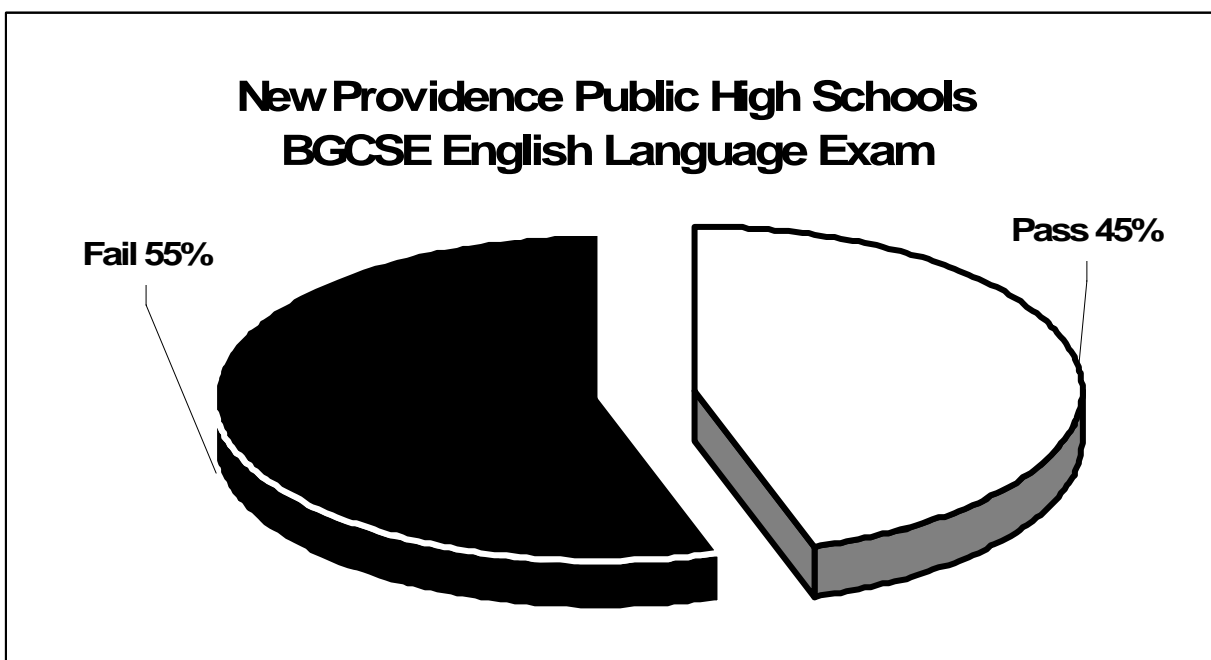
To simplify the analysis, it –

- Used the four point grading scheme previously described,
- Considered only private and public high schools on New Providence,
- Grouped the test results to show the average scores for All Private and All public schools separately, and
- Showed the range in school scores by simply listing the High Scoring and Low Scoring schools.

The results of that analysis are shown on the facing page.

BGCSE 2006 English Language Exam High Schools on New Providence

Skill Level	Pass	Fail
BGCSE Grade Levels	A, B, C & D	E, F, G & U
High Schools:		
High Scoring Private	99%	1%
All Private	87%	13%
All Public	45%	55%
Low Scoring Public	39%	61%



The table and graph show significant academic underachievement on a large scale in the English language.

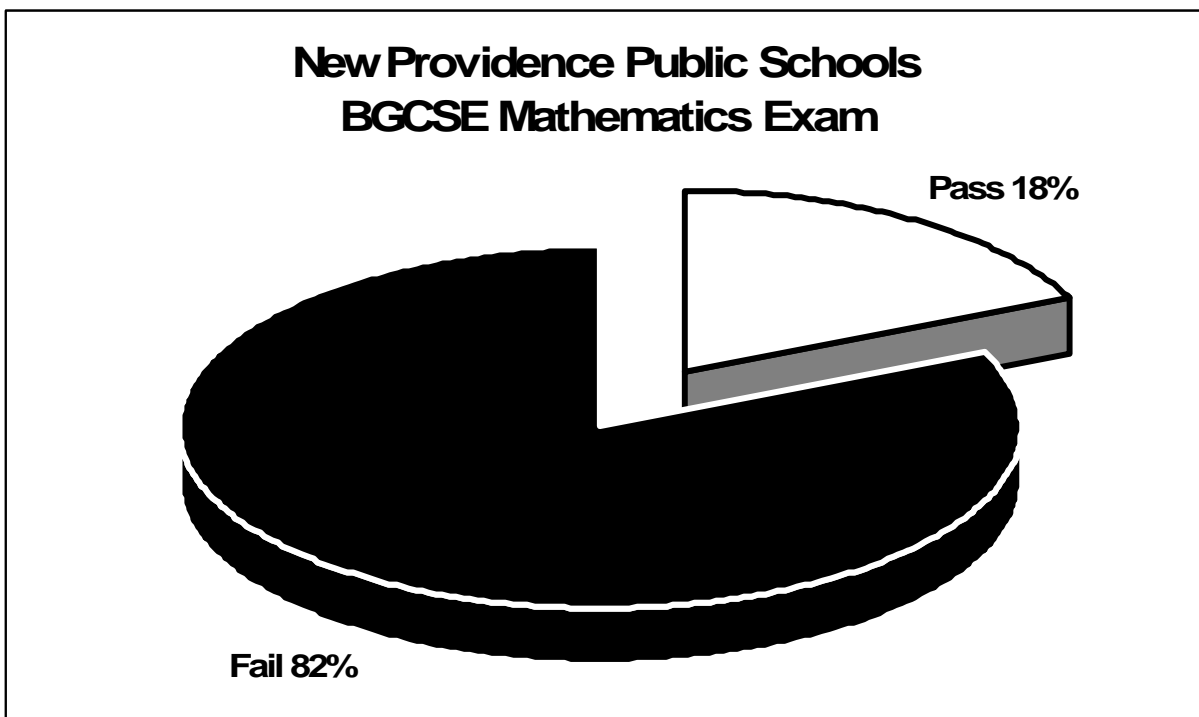
Furthermore, the Coalition firmly agrees with Orlando Patterson, the noted Harvard University sociologist, who contends that such a test “does not measure intelligence but learnable cognitive and educational skills.”

Mathematics

Next, we turn to Mathematics. Using the same procedure of looking at the scores on the BGCSE English Language exams, we get the table and graph below.

BGCSE 2006 Mathematics Exam High Schools on New Providence

Skill Level	Pass	Fail
BGCSE Grade Levels	A,B,C&D	E, F, G & U
High Schools:		
High Scoring Private	99%	1%
All Private	67%	33%
All Public	18%	82%
Low Scoring Public	10%	90%



The disturbing factor is that the math data is substantially more discouraging than is the case with the English Language results. The number of students failing the exam was 82% versus 61% for English.

The extent of under-achievement in math is simply both massive and unacceptable. One cannot escape the conclusion that illiteracy, especially in mathematics, is alive and thriving in the Bahamas to its detriment.

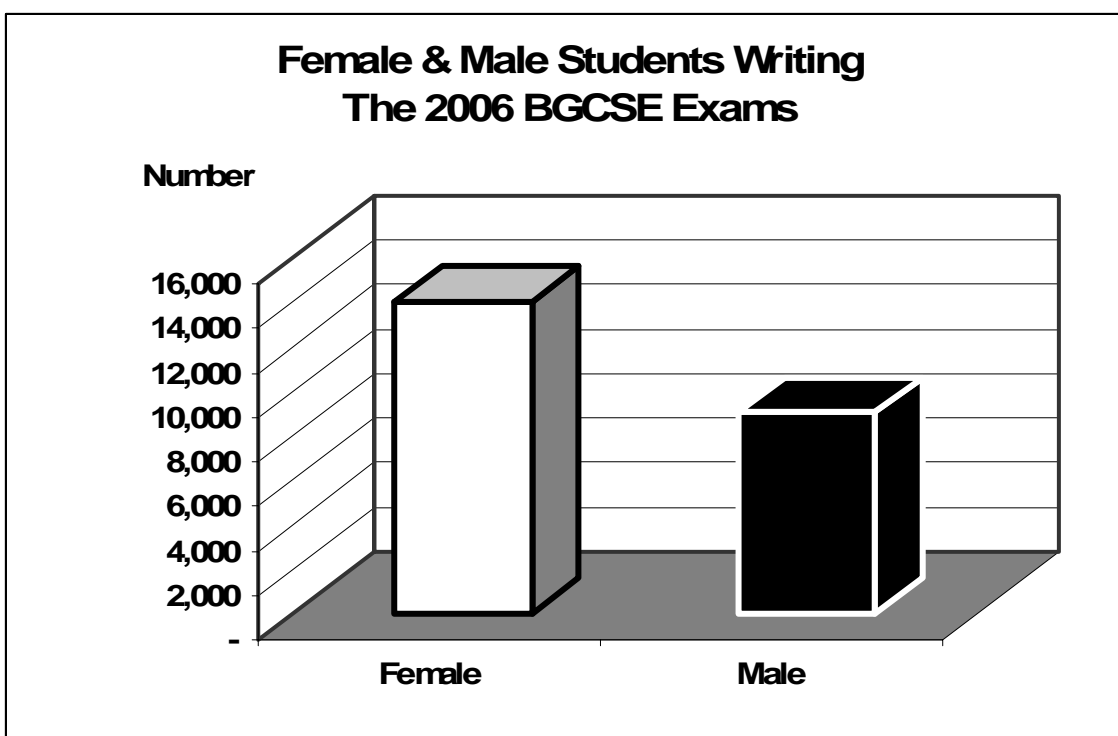
Implications

Everyone in business, science and engineering agree that an understanding of basic math is critical to a range of both low-tech and high-tech jobs...from carpentry to computer system maintenance, the management of a small business and even the management of one's personal finances.

- Cooks must be able to understand portion control when following a given set of recipes.
- A maid working in a modern hotel must use a telephone to input information into a system that is available to the front desk so that rooms can be filled promptly.
- The cashier no longer just receives cash. She must be able to multi-task.
- The maid, dishwasher and handyman must be able to read the safety warnings and follow operating instructions that can change. It is essential for maintenance work on equipment that runs 24 hours a day and 7 days a week.

Male Disengagement

A major dimension to the education problem is the disengagement of the average Bahamian male from education as seen in the following graph.



		Total
14,036	9,027	23,063
61%	39%	100%

Male and female students start primary school in approximately equal numbers. But in 2006 while 23,063 exams were written, only 39% of this total were by male students. The male/female difference is a crude measure of the male disengagement from education.

In addition, males on average earned lower grades and this meant that for the BGCSE exams females earned almost twice as many As, Bs and Cs as males.

Conclusion

One cannot help but conclude that two overwhelming and critical national problems are the scarcity of basic linguistic and mathematical skills and the disengaged male. What we are looking at is a societal failure of immense consequences.

Not facing this issue merely causes the problem to grow year after year.

The Response

The 2005 Report of the Coalition identified specific areas and programs that could start the country on the road of reform, the 14 strategies. This Report highlights six of them.

Order & Civility. Disorder and incivility in the classroom are significant barriers to learning. The reality of teaching in the public system is that resolving classroom conflict replaces learning; outstanding teachers “burnout”; they leave the profession; and the system is diminished by their leaving.

The Education Act, the School Standing Orders and the Manual for Administrators and Teachers are long on expectations and short on defining authority, responsibilities and consequences.

- Parents are compelled to send their children from age five to sixteen to school.
- Students must attend and can be expelled readily if they commit a felony.
- Only the Minister of Education can expel; and he can do it only when the student is sixteen years old or older.

The net effect is that the ability to teach and manage the school room is undermined.

This must change.

Management. Today...principals cannot manage their “education business”. They are not able to –

- Control their budgets in order to optimize teacher and student performance,
- Provide a proper physical environment,
- Reward good teaching, and
- Hire, fire and discipline teachers and other direct employees.

This must change.

Teachers. Given their responsibilities relative to other public service employees, teachers appear under-compensated in terms of pay and working conditions and under-supported in the availability of the needed tools of the trade.

AND...given the bad student behavior, they should be eligible for “combat pay”. Unfortunately, that appears to be the awful truth.

Yet at the same time one looks at the academic accomplishments of the average school leaver and one wonders, for instance, “Just who is teaching math?”

While there are outstanding teachers in the public school system, there is a public concern that some teachers appear to be inadequately trained, miss-utilized or under-motivated. Then there is the reference by Michael Craton, the noted historian...

“The number of teaching candidates [after Majority Rule] multiplied six fold in a decade” while “the proportion of entrants with the original requirement of five “O” level passes fell from 90 to less than 10 percent”.²

We do know that –

- Teacher compensation is based solely on seniority and the number of teacher training courses taken.
- Teachers commonly teach “out of field”...meaning “that they earned neither an undergraduate major nor a minor in their main teaching field.”
- In the present system degrees in core subjects like math, sociology or history are not on a par for compensation purposes with “Teachers Ed”
- The annual teacher performance review rates a teacher on a scale of one to five; and it is reported that virtually all teachers receive a “Four” rating described as “Above Average” or a “Five” described as “Outstanding.”
- Actual teacher compensation is not connected to some measure of student performance in learning.

The initiation and implementation of such changes will require the skillful conduct of labor contract negotiations.

Social Promotion.

Social Promotion is the practice of allowing students who have failed to meet performance standards to pass on to the next grade. Students can flow through the system with a minimum effort if they simply attend school and avoid committing a felony. The expected reward for such performance is a lavish prom and a diploma or now...possibly...a “certificate of attendance”.

² Michael Craton, **A History of the Bahamas**, 3rd. Edition, San Salvador Press, 1986, page 281.

Social promotion destroys discipline and cripples the learning process. Finding the means to end or greatly modify this practice now is truly a gigantic problem. That is the challenge.

The Disengaged Male. Any discussion of the education crisis must consider the dysfunctional aspects of Bahamian society such as the consequences of the single parent-female headed family unit, the related disengagement of the average father from parenting, etc.

Within this social environment young males fall behind academically.

This must change.

The All Male Primary and Secondary School. The recovery of the Bahamian male is the reason that the Coalition recommended that the Ministry of Education start with the establishment of an All Male Primary and Secondary School. This proposal is common sense; the aim is to shape the culture of the student.

The main elements for the success of such a school are drawn from other existing education models. They include –

- Sixty-two percent more instruction time.
- A terrific principal with the power and authority to manage.
- Outstanding teachers.
- A relentless focus on the core academic subjects.
- An insistence that students learn basic historical facts, basic math, punctuation, grammar, and the meaning of often unfamiliar words.
- A safe and orderly environment conducive to learning.

The objective is to –

- Demonstrate how good public education can be and
- Create initially a male “varsity team” in academics.

That is the objective of the All Male Primary and Secondary School. And...it should not preclude the subsequent founding of a comparable all female school.

Organizational Change. Such a program for educational reform can only be “reached” if the Department of Education is redesigned and reengineered and allowed to do its job free from political management.

- For instance, both the proposed All Male Primary and Secondary School and the Teaching Leadership School Project proposed by the Teachers Education Division of COB have to be independent educational enterprises.

- Specific budgeting, incentive and management systems that are widely used in successful businesses are needed for such a de-centralized school system.
- The public system should adopt the proven elements that are conducive to learning in the private school system.

Today there is a large “education” bureaucracy, a strong union and inflexible laws that govern employment. The bureaucracy, union and the politicians must be convinced that their long-term self-interest can be best served by their support of this great endeavor; and they with the broader community must take the necessary steps to make it happen.

Somehow the country must awaken to the need to make hard decisions. Failure to do so means lower economic growth and increased social instability.

September 28, 2007