SPEECH GIVEN BY COMMANDER IN CHIEF, FIDEL CASTRO RUZ, PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF CUBA AT THE CEREMONY TO LAUNCH THE 2003-2004 **[1]**

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Dear Fellow Cubans:

Of all countries, big or small, rich or poor, Cuba ranks first in the field of education. This was achieved setting out from a situation where 30 percent of people of school age and older were unable to read or write and 60 percent were functionally illiterate, if we include young people and adults who had little knowledge or education and who had not gone beyond the third or fourth grade in an extremely inadequate primary education system.

There were not enough teachers to educate the millions of children and adolescents. They had to be trained. There were no teachers or schools for the overwhelming majority when they reached sixth or ninth grade. We had to create them; a selfless vanguard of education students who had completed tenth grade combined the tasks of studying and teaching junior high. Later we had to do the same thing in senior high school with those who had passed twelfth grade.

We created facilities to accommodate 50,000 mid-level students annually.

At that time there were only three universities which offered a small range of degree courses. In less than 25 years, over 50 higher educational institutions were founded which today offer more than 85 degree courses.

University education, an unavoidable necessity of any vigorous educational revolution, is being gradually extended to all municipalities in the country.

There were no day-care centres, no schools for children with special needs, no sports schools, no technical schools, no professional training schools nor enough primary schools for all school-age children and adolescents. Our people’s determination, patience and heroism worked the miracle of creating thousands of schools where 2,500,474 children, adolescents and young people are studying and the miracle of creating dozens of universities where, this school year, more than 300,000 students have registered.

The Revolution has created all of this at a speed that has neither precedent nor parallel in history

Compare it to what there is in the Third World and even in the developed countries.

Cuba today, as acknowledged by prestigious institutions, ranks first in knowledge of mathematics and language among primary school students. One hundred percent of children are registered for the grade corresponding to their age, and all of that one hundred percent go as far as sixth grade; 99 percent of them get as far as ninth grade and all of those who go that far can continue their higher studies.

We have a total population of 11,177,743 inhabitants, of which only 0.2 percent is illiterate —almost all

of these are very elderly people who did not have the advantage of the educational system which our country has today.

Cuban children today boast the best student-teacher ratio for primary school students; 1 to 20 and 2 teachers per classroom if there are more than 20 students. As everybody knows, in Havana the ratio was reduced from 37 to 18 students per classroom in just two years when 789 primary and secondary schools where either extensively renovated or new schools built.

In the summer of 2001 five schools for training art teachers were established.

New painting, theatre, dance and music schools were established in all provincial capitals and other large cities.

Two new educational television channels have been set up: one of them is already on air nationwide and the second will be fully operative within six months.

The Book Fair, which used to be held only in Havana, is now held in no less than 30 cities.

New printing capacity will mean that all of the population will have access, at a minimal cost, to the best literature and to books on scientific, political, social and cultural subjects through the family library system. This was invented in Cuba and is now spreading to other countries, as are methods of teaching literacy by radio and television which are destined to bring about a revolution in world education.

A list of inventions and new educational and cultural methods that have great social and human impact would be endless. Even the Revolution’s most vicious enemies would not dare to deny that this is so.

What are the conditions at the beginning of the new school year after the amazing progress made over the last four years and when the Special Period is still not over?

After ten years of scientific research, our country has been using the social programme "Educate Your Child" nationwide since the 1992-3 school year. The aim of this programme is to train families to help children aged zero to six years attain a good comprehensive development. It is the family which systematically carries out basic educational activities with their children. The gradual expansion of the programme has meant that 99.5 percent of children in that age group have received attention in formal and non-formal ways such as day care and pre-school centres.

A decisive factor in this programme has been the involvement of family doctors and nurses, of culture and sports teachers, of the members of the Federation of Cuban Women, of the CDRs, of union and peasant organization representatives, of local governments, most especially the popular councils who work in conjunction with more than 100,000 actors, as they are called, whose responsibility it is to train, attend to and support families. Training the latter is done by more than 30,000 promoters who train and evaluate. Of these, 8,286 are qualified teachers from the ministry of education

A 1999’s evaluation showed that 87 percent of a sample of 48,000 children exhibited all the development indicators for their age; this was 34.6 percentage points higher than the results of an evaluation done in 1994. The 84 percent of families surveyed, more than 47,000, admit that there have been changes in attitude in their relationships with their children: they spend more time with them, they are more caring, they listen to them, they do not mistreat them psychologically or physically. There is also recognition of the way the programme contributes to a family’s cultural enrichment: 62 percent say they listen to more music, 52 percent have started to visit museums and other cultural institutions, 44 percent read more and 64 percent make more effort to obtain story books for their children and to read to them.

As a result of the system of educational care for children from birth to 6 years of age, 96.8 percent of children who completed pre-school education this last year adequately developed the basic skills that

will allow them to have a successful start to their education.

The incorporation of computer education at pre-school level in our country is something new and unique because of how widespread it is and because of the scientific and educational principles and concepts which underlie it. The generalised introduction of computer education goes hand in hand with research that allows us to define our position on the use of computers in educating pre-school children according to our understanding about preventing, identifying, controlling and eliminating any and every risk factor presented by the use of computers at this age.

Last school year 117,868 boys and girls in the pre-school grade of grammar school had 30 minutes a week of computer education. Starting this year, the 23,527 children registered in the pre-school grade in day care centres will also receive computer education. To that end we plan to install the necessary equipment in day-care centres.

There are 832 teachers who have been trained as computer skills educators for these ages and they are receiving further training to teach the next level. The studies done so far show the contribution computer education makes to developing children’s fine motor skills and intellectual skills; this is something they need to do by the time they finish their pre-school education and which serves as the foundation for first grade.

This school year there will be 20 children or less in 84 percent of primary education classrooms.

There is a reserve pool of teachers in all provinces except La Habana, Matanzas and Camagüey where efforts are being made to overcome this problem.

The excellent current situation was made possible by employing more than 14,662 young teachers trained in intensive courses; this has been a great success.

Both morning and afternoon sessions have been established for more than 96.6 percent of primary school children all over the country. But the most important change has been in the way school organization has been improved to allow for a single timetable in which teaching activities take place both in the morning and in the afternoon session. This will increase the number of times a week Spanish language and mathematics classes are given. Priority will be given in the first to spelling, using the dictionary, handwriting and drafting and understanding texts. In mathematics more attention will be given to addition, subtraction, multiplication and division, problem solving, measurements and geometry.

English will be taught, using audio-visual methods, once a week from grade three to five, twice a week in grade six. This will begin in January.

The development of 41 software packages will bring about basic changes in the teaching-learning relationship between the classroom teacher and the computer teacher. They will work together, in both teaching and extracurricular activities and this will allow us to improve the quality of learning and to provide a general, all-round education.

An assessment of the quality of education in Havana carried out in 1999 revealed that children there did not learn the material taught in each grade quickly enough nor well enough. Proof of this is that in grade four, only 43.3 percent of responses in mathematics and 53.5 percent of responses in Spanish were correct.

The special measures applied to education in Havana revealed that in June of this year the number of correct response in mathematics had risen to 71 percent and to 86 percent in Spanish. The assimilation of the knowledge provided at each grade level was 60 percent better than in 1999.

Special education this school year, as has been the case for some years now, will ensure that all

physically and learning challenged children will be given attention tailored to their ability to learn. There are currently 51,938 of these children and our system has 14,600 teachers and specialists for them. There will be 1,386 children taught at home by 580 teachers while 372 children will be receive their lessons in 22 hospital classrooms.

An outstanding feature of this type of education is the introduction of new treatment methods for 241 autistic children, for 106 deaf and blind children and for 14 with cochlear implants. We have been working on introducing and testing new methods and equipment to make it easier for students with certain disabilities to have access to computer education: tactile screens, visualvoice, switches, intelligent keyboards and scanners.

We shall employ 252 more sign language interpreters and support teachers for deaf and blind students and for those with physical disabilities. This will allow to improve the quality of care given to them.

This school year a modern Braille printing press became operative to print books and other texts to allow blind students to improve their general education. We have 193 diagnosis and guidance centres nationwide which employ more than 1,056 specialists who assess and diagnose students with special educational needs.

The computer education programme has continued to develop at all educational levels, and everybody registered benefits from it. There are 46,290 computers in pre-school, primary and junior high schools facilities, including all rural schools. To be able to install these we had to supply electricity with solar panels to 2,368 schools —93 of these have only one student— which attests to the conscientious effort that the Revolution puts into the education of every child, without exception.

The current curriculum teaches students to operate a computer, to do word processing, work with graphics and tables, to create multimedia presentations and web pages and to solve problems from various subject areas. And this is extremely important: computers are being increasingly used as a tool for teaching other subjects.

There are 19,227 computer teachers teaching the programme, 13,805 of these are new jobs. There are two new educational software packages in use: "Multisaber", which has 41 programmes for primary and special education and "El Navegante" with 37 programmes for secondary education. These will enable the use of educational software to support the teaching of all subjects at primary and secondary levels.

The most notable features of these software packages are that they are highly interactive, they use multimedia resources, such as videos, sounds photos, specialised dictionaries, explanations from experienced teachers, exercises and educational games which help with assessment and diagnosis.

The forecast is that registration at the schools for art teachers this school year will be 4,840 in the first year, 4,038 in the second, 3,605 in the third and 3,523 in the fourth and final year.

The teaching staff at these schools is made up of 2,929 professors, of whom 948 are generalists and 1,981 specialists. Actually, 1,384 of them are professional artists.

Of the 158,800 students who graduated from grade nine last year, 89,100 have gone on to senior high and 69,700 have gone on to technical and professional schools.

In September 2001, the overall upgrading course for young people was created. Two years later, we have been able to assess the enormous impact this has had on the family, the community, on teachers and students as a result of the behavioural changes exhibited by these young people.

The last course had 102,005 student registered, 64,488 of whom are studying for their high school graduation certificate and 34,318 have gone on to higher education.

The Alvaro Reynoso educational programme began during the 2002-2003 school year and this year there is a total of 128,377 workers involved. Of these, there are 38,103 whose job is studying; they are 30 percent of the total. On the other hand, 4,786, because of their high educational level, are working as instructors and the remaining 85,488 combine work and study.

In this coming school year, and as a result of the Revolution's plans, more than 100,000 Cubans will start higher education. There has been a significant increase in the registration of students in the degree programmes taught in the municipalities—this is a new paradigm in Cuban higher education at its current stage of development.

The basis of the universalisation model in teaching degree programmes is that students are taught in 5,204 teaching institutions or micro-universities, where they are under the supervision of a tutor who works with them for the whole degree course. The basic texts for each degree have been provided to each student on a compact disc. Counting both faculty members and tutors, 41,973 teaching personnel will be involved.

In 2003, the creation of a plan for the extensive renovation of 110 schools in the rest of the country --this includes increasing the number of classrooms to ensure there are 20 or less children per classroom in primary schools and a morning and afternoon session in junior high-- and totally replacing school furniture and fittings has given a strong impetus to efforts to improve the quality of education in all provinces.

Of the 110 schools in the 2003 plan, 31 were ready by the start of this school year, 56 will be completed by the end of September, 20 in October and 3 between November and December. A special effort will be made to extensively renovate 200 more provincial schools in 2004. We would have liked to renovate a larger number but we should remember that an extremely important health sector programme, which involves a lot of building projects, is presently underway across the nation.

A characteristic of this 2003-2004 school year and one that will make it go down in history, is a profound and unprecedented revolution in Cuban secondary education, that is, grades seven, eight and nine. This will have worldwide implications. Teaching at this level, decisive in forming the personality and the life of all children and adolescents, is extremely complex and is an educational disaster on an international scale.

In an educational system where overspecialised teachers teach classes of 200 to 300 students divided in groups of 30 or 40 students, they cannot even learn the names of all of their students, nor get to know their individual characteristics, or their personal problems, or anything about their families or the social environment they live in, or give students the careful and individualised attention that every adolescent needs. If education, and Luz y Caballero especially wanted to say this in a prophetical way in his famous phrase which we interpret in this way: it is more important and more difficult to educate than to instruct. This is an irrefutable truth. We believe that in our country today we can do both things. In the world today, where massive education is required, the traditional system can neither educate nor instruct, regardless of the professors' efforts and the quality of their own training.

An American, the 1988 winner of the Nobel Prize for Physics, Leon Max Lederman recently said something very interesting. He said that it is imperative to improve education, that what is important is that when teenagers leave junior high school they think scientifically, never mind what profession they choose later on. He added that junior high must be reformed so that students are in sync with the 21st century so that they can handle accelerated development and its socio-political consequences. He said that they have to be able to earn their living but at the same time to be committed to rationality as a way of life, able to deal with a constantly changing world.

He went on to say that if all this happens the new junior high graduates will leave school knowing more about science than those who have got their high school graduation certificate and more even than Harvard graduates. There is no doubt that they would be better parents, sons and daughters, workers

and human beings. The student who is now labelled average would become a genius.

For us, who for some time now have been aware of the need to do something about teaching at this level, the basic difficulty is how to reconcile the qualification needed by the teacher, his or her personal vocation, the amount and number of times per week each subject is taught and the total number of teachers needed.

In the midst of the battle of ideas, we sought high and low for ways to solve this problem. One of the ideas that came up was that of training all-round teachers. Although this was an enormous task, we did not hesitate to go down that road.

On the other hand, what were we to do with the large number of excellent specialist teachers who had been trained over many years?

Our restless search for solutions finally led us to ways that, based on many other ideas that had already been tested and on concrete experiments, enabled us to come up with the daring and revolutionary method that we finally adopted, whose implementation on a mass scale begins today, September 8, 2003.

This combines the solid expertise of the specialised teachers, a powerful contingent of young intensively trained teachers who are committed to teaching all subjects and to teach and be with the same class for three years, and an exhaustive and systematic use of the most up-to-date audiovisual methods.

The final outcome will be one teacher for every 15 students, mostly in classrooms with 30 students; two teachers who cooperate closely but each of whom is personally responsible for everything to do with the education and character formation of 15 students, their tutoring, guidance and preparation for life during this decisive educational stage.

The biggest difficulties, as is usually the case, were to be found in our country’s capital. Since many thousands of young people had been recruited there to be trained as social workers, intensively trained primary school teachers, equally intensively trained nurses, physiotherapy and other healthcare technicians, computer skills teachers, students specially chosen for the University of Information Sciences --already up and running and expanding rapidly although still not formally opened-- the city did not have enough young people with grade twelve education who could be intensively trained as junior high school teachers. Added to that was the fact that education in Havana was the most deficient in all of Cuba and the consequences of this could be seen in the level of knowledge and training of its young people.

There was not a minute to lose. More than four thousand excellent young grade twelve graduates came to Havana’s rescue from all of the other provinces and they started their training at the prestigious Salvador Allende School and will be teaching what they have learned this year, aided by very valuable specialised teachers. And that is what will happen successively every year with the new intensively trained teachers who graduate from the Salvador Allende School until Havana has enough teachers. They will later go with their students when they go back to their home provinces.

The results from the experimental Yuri Gagarin School and another similar school, the José Martí, in Havana Vieja offer proof of the advantages of this new concept of junior high school education which is a novel and revolutionary contribution to education for adolescents.

Some of the most important results are as follows: better and more punctual attendance at classes; persuasion and self-regulation by the students themselves is the predominant form of discipline; good teacher-student-family communication and a high rating given to the quality of the lessons. Better learning results are obtained than under the previous model when compared with the initial assessment of students made using the tools of international standards in mathematics and Spanish.

These results are:

At the beginning of the school year in October 2002 in the Yuri Gagarin School: 31.9 percent of answers in mathematics were satisfactory; in May 2003, the figure increased to 65.7 percent. Knowledge of Spanish, initial stage, October 2002: 57.9 percent of answers were satisfactory; in May 2003, 77.3 percent.

At the beginning of the school year in October 2002 in the José Martí School: 30 percent of answers in mathematics were satisfactory; in May 2003, the figure increased to 54.3 percent. Knowledge of Spanish, initial stage, October 2002: 57.2 percent of answers were satisfactory; in May 2003, 70.1 percent.

The control schools Jorge Villaboy and Enrique Galarraga. At the beginning of the school year in October 2002: 31.9 percent of answers in mathematics were satisfactory; in May 2003, 44 percent. Knowledge of Spanish, initial stage, October 2002: 59.1 percent of answers were satisfactory; in May 2003, 54.7 percent.

Students at the José Martí and Yuri Gagarin Schools doubled their knowledge as compared to the control schools which continued using the traditional teaching methods. Moreover, at the end of the 2002-2003 school year 99.16 percent of Yuri Gagarin School students passed the course and only 3 students out of 358 students failed. At the experimental José Martí School, a much more complex place, 98.8 percent of the students passed and 14 out of 1,167 students failed.

One hundred percent of all the junior high schools in the country, with an attendance of 494,318 students, started the school year using the methods outlined above. These can be defined as a synthesis of all the experiences obtained, including, as is to be expected, the experiences of the experimental Yuri Gagarin and José Martí Schools.

The way in which the teachers working in junior high schools responded to the challenge, 33,281 of whom, that is 94.8 percent, said they were willing to take part in the programme --given the role they play in our society makes them worthy of the name of all-round teachers-- is one of the main reasons for this success.

Equally important was the decisive and extraordinary contribution made by the teaching staff of the Salvador Allende School made up by 409 teachers, 89 of whom have masters’ degrees and 43 have PhD s.

This school year, 95 percent of all students at junior high school will have the benefit of having both morning and afternoon sessions.

In the framework of the educational revolution, the use of television, video and computers is an irreplaceable instructive and educational element which plays a major role in awakening students’ interest, in making them more motivated, in stimulating independent thought, critical thinking, the love of research and creativity, all of which will enable us to go on improving the learning-teaching process in a ceaseless effort to raise the quality of education.

Computer science that had been assigned 172 hours in the curriculum will have this year 216 hours. In grades seven and eight, 50 percent of teaching time will be spent teaching computer science and 50 percent of the rest of the time computers will be used as an educational tool with the involvement of the computer science teacher and the all-round teacher. In grade nine it will be used as a teaching method in all subjects.

The efforts made by teleteachers and advisors to create attractive and innovative classes that use a scientific approach and arouse students’ interest and motivation are considered highly positive. They do this by employing didactic materials, learning techniques, study methods and activities that use new

technologies and are intended to developing logical thought.

The programme of video classes for junior high school will have all mathematics, Spanish, literature, history and English classes recorded for all grades as well as physics for grades eight and nine. This will be a wonderful tool for teaching both students and teachers.

Classes are recorded with teachers working in teams of two and in the presence of junior high students. In Havana, 28 teleteachers and 252 students divided into 14 groups took part. In the provinces of Cienfuegos, Villa Clara, and Santiago de Cuba, 24 teachers and 216 students were involved, giving a total for the country of 52 teachers and 468 students who took part in recording video classes in their vacations and will continue to do so until the end of the school year. They showed amazing enthusiasm for and dedication to this task.

Additionally, the curriculum for junior high has increased to five the number of times a week that mathematics and Spanish-literature are taught and has added 20 percent more new subject areas such as computer science, technical training and history in grade nine.

It is significant that that the content of each subject will be taught in both sessions and the material taught on the television and video will be practiced, reviewed and consolidated three or four times a day.

The subjects included in this curriculum are art education in grade seven, biology, geography and chemistry in grades eight and nine and technical training also in grade nine.

To extend the morning and afternoon sessions to all junior high schools in Havana, 550 classrooms, four new junior highs and three extensions were built. Likewise, 13 groups of residences were created to house the all-round teachers who will be working in junior high schools in the capital. The work was done discreetly but the effort made with the help of other provinces was really amazing and commendable.

To ensure that most of the country’s junior high school students have both morning and afternoon sessions, a joint effort was made with other agencies and organisations to find the necessary space. This, plus the allocation of 120,000 more school desks for this program will mean that all of the locations will have the necessary furniture.

In September, we will have 177 junior high schools providing school snacks to 93,169 students and 9,728 workers. If we add to these the 115,110 students at this level who are boarders, we shall be providing this service to 42 percent of the total number of junior high school students.

From now until September next year, one hundred percent of non-boarding students will receive this snack at midday containing about 40 percent of the protein needed at that age.

Finally, I should indicate that eight countries, both large and small, including one from the OECD are using the Cuban method of teaching literacy by radio and television. The interest in and requests for Cuba’s technical cooperation and advice keep growing. This unstoppable movement could put an end to the shameful and endless figure of 860 million illiterate and billions of semi-literate people in the Third World.

Our most treacherous enemies within and without the country are amazed by our people’s heroic resistance and the Revolution’s successes. And especially since the battle of ideas began and neoliberal ideology and the unfair economic order imposed on the world, already at the height of its decline and in a profound crisis, began to progressively crumble. There are some sly people who can hardly wait to launch new attacks; they are incapable of understanding that there is no power in the world that can defeat the Cuban revolution if, as we have done for half a century, we are able to perceive and overcome our mistakes and preserve the virtues which brought us, as they will always bring us, victory.

The name of Cuba will go down in history for ever because of what it has done and is still doing for humanity in the fields of education, culture and health in the most difficult period that our species has known.

Our country is blockaded by the only superpower and almost blockaded by Europe, but these together will not be able to defeat the Cuban revolution, among other things because together they do not have and will never have either the human capital or the moral values to do what socialist Cuba has been able to do.

Long live socialism!

We shall overcome!

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[1] http://www.comandanteenjefe.net/en/discursos/speech-ceremony-launch-2003-2004