

# Speak Up! Speak Out! Building HIV and AIDS Awareness among Jamaican School Children

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## ABSTRACT

**Background and Purpose:** The Government of Jamaica, through the Ministry of Health and other ministries, assisted by international funding agencies and members of non-governmental organizations, has diligently led the charge to reduce the incidence of HIV and AIDS in Jamaica. Yet, the continued escalation in the infection rate attested to the need for education towards the reduction of stigma and discrimination, factors that fuel the spread of the virus. Significant efforts were made to woo corporations in Jamaica to redouble their efforts and provide resources to address the continued escalation of the AIDS epidemic in Jamaica. Scotiabank Jamaica responded with a unique educational initiative.

**Methods:** The Scotiabank National Primary Schools HIV and AIDS Debating Competition in 2006–2007 was conducted over a seven-month period. It was opened to primary-level, government and private institutions islandwide.

**Results:** A total of 91 institutions competed with each other, debating 16 moots (ie topics) in 417 debates from the first preliminary rounds through to the final. Moots reflected curricular and extracurricular concerns, emphasized the values of compassion, healthy lifestyles, critical thinking and child rights; they also sent messages of anti-discrimination, and parental and community responsibilities. Whereas communication between the organizers and the schools was sometimes challenging, schools subscribed to the activity (debates) for the awareness it brought and for the potential for developing students. Attempts were also made to raise awareness among teachers, parents and the general community.

**Conclusion:** Feedback at the end acclaimed the debates as a valuable strategy for building awareness as well as development of student potential and unity around a common cause.

# ¡Habla! ¡Di lo que Piensas!: Desarrollando la Conciencia en Torno al VIH y el SIDA Entre los Escolares de Jamaica

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## RESUMEN

**Antecedentes y Propósito:** El Gobierno de Jamaica, a través del Ministerio de Salud y otros ministerios. Con la asistencia de agencias de fondos internacionales y miembros de organizaciones no gubernamentales, ha centrado diligentemente todos sus esfuerzos en reducir la incidencia del VIH y el SIDA en Jamaica. No obstante, la continua escalada de la tasa de infección acusa la necesidad de una educación con respecto al estigma y la discriminación – factores que atizan la diseminación del virus. Se realizaron esfuerzos significativos por recabar el apoyo de las corporaciones en Jamaica a fin de que redoblen sus esfuerzos y provean recursos para abordar la continua escalada de la epidemia del SIDA en Jamaica. El Scotiabank de Jamaica respondió con una iniciativa educacional única.

**Métodos:** La Competencia nacional de debates sobre el VIH y el SIDA patrocinada por Scotiabank en las escuelas primarias 2006–2007, se llevó a cabo por un período de siete meses. Estuvo abierta a instituciones de nivel primario, gubernamentales y privadas en toda la isla.

**Resultados:** Un total de 91 instituciones compitieron entre sí, debatiendo 16 puntos (es decir, asuntos) en 417 debates desde las primeras rondas preliminares hasta las finales. Los puntos a debatir reflejaban preocupaciones curriculares y extra-curriculares, enfatizaban los valores de la compasión, los

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*estilos de vida saludables, el pensamiento crítico y los derechos de los niños. También enviaban mensajes de anti-discriminación, y de responsabilidad de la comunidad y los padres. Si bien la comunicación entre los organizadores y las escuelas, resultó por momentos un verdadero reto, las escuelas se suscribieron a la actividad (los debates) por la concientización que traía consigo y por el potencial para desarrollar a los estudiantes. Se trató también de elevar el nivel de conciencia entre los maestros, los padres y la comunidad en general.*

**Conclusión:** *La retroalimentación al final elogiaba los debates como una estrategia valiosa para la concientización así como para el desarrollo del potencial del estudiante y la unidad en torno a una causa común.*

## BACKGROUND

Scotiabank recognized the magnitude of the impending HIV and AIDS crisis and chose to become actively engaged in the fight to contain the epidemic. In 2005, Scotiabank in Toronto called on its companies in the Caribbean to introduce activities to increase staff awareness of HIV and AIDS as a worldwide epidemic (1). Mr William Clarke, President and Chief Executive Officer, Scotiabank Jamaica, agreed to become the spokesman on HIV and AIDS in the Caribbean. Scotiabank Jamaica then initiated the first phase of a programme which saw staff raising funds to contribute to the educational programme of Jamaica AIDS Support for Life and a residential institution for children with HIV and AIDS. Phase two began in November 2006 with the inception of the Speak Up! Speak Out! National Primary Schools HIV and AIDS Debating Competition, an education programme. It complemented both the Bank's corporate objective of supporting health and education and the debate organized by the Ministry of Education and Youth for secondary level students in 2006.

In 2006, Scotiabank also became one of 19 founding members of the Jamaica Business Council on HIV and AIDS, further demonstrating its commitment to prevention, treatment and elimination of discrimination associated with AIDS in the workplace. In 2007, Scotiabank became a member of the Global Business Coalition on HIV and AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria.

*"We must all accept the fact that the HIV and AIDS epidemic can cripple our society. We must 'Speak Up and Speak Out' about the behaviours that encourage the spread of this disease and become aware of the 'dos and don'ts' in coping with HIV and AIDS. Those who are educated about this disease must share their knowledge with those who are unaware, as our survival depends on our level of awareness and action (2007)." This was how Mr Clarke later summarized Scotiabank's ongoing commitment to promoting HIV and AIDS awareness (2).*

## Purpose

Whereas Scotiabank's involvement was multi-pronged, the most visible action was the 2006–2007 educational initiative. This used the National Primary Schools HIV and AIDS Debating Competition as the hub for evolving the *Speak Up! Speak Out!* Campaign for HIV and AIDS awareness among

young students, their teachers, other significant adults, members of the school and wider community.

The debate was conceptualized as a process – a journey more than an event. At the end, students would be rewarded with new poise, competences in critical analysis and oratory, and confidence in themselves and their abilities to *Speak Up!* and *Speak Out!* in their schools and communities. The vision driving the competition was an aware and empowered student community, willing to *Speak Up!* and *Speak out!* in the national effort to change negative attitudes and behaviours associated with HIV and AIDS.

The specific aims included the raising of HIV and AIDS awareness, primarily among young children; changing attitudes of students, teachers and other significant adults towards Persons Living With with AIDS (PLWAs) and promoting healthy lifestyles among at-risk groups vulnerable to HIV/AIDS.

## METHODS

The initial framework articulated in a Concept Paper served as the springboard for evolving the plan (3). The guiding principles were: Competition Scope – whereas the competition was opened to all primary level institutions, irrespective of school type in the public and private sectors, it targeted 300 institutions. Collaboration – the competition was to be executed collaboratively with public and private sector agencies. Community engagement – deliberate attempts were to be made to engage the community with a view to reducing stigma and discrimination.

The execution of the competition then moved through a series of action steps. Project activities were anchored by a small secretariat led by the coordinator who reported to the Director – Public, Corporate and Government Affairs (PCGA). Three part-time regional coordinators, reporting to the debate coordinator, were also engaged to mobilize and monitor activities in the field. A monitoring committee comprising representatives of the PCGA, the Ministries of Health and Education and Youth and two primary schools was established.

Arriving at a "catch phrase", early public media announcements, and registration of schools were among the earliest activities. The development of the schools' database, critical to the procurement of resource materials and decisions on the dramatized stories, followed. The December

2006 launch of the competition marked the second implementation phase as well as significant acceleration in the pace of activities. Coaches and coordinators were expected to sensitize school communities to the awareness building project and mobilize their participation in line with the schedule supplied. The 294 schools that registered were expected to indicate progress in their preparations utilizing the Monitoring Checklist provided.

Initially, twenty moots (*ie* topics with opposing viewpoints) were approved by the Monitoring Committee. Moots were referenced to The National Policy for HIV/AIDS Management in Schools (4), The Ministry of Education and Youth Curriculum for Health and Family Life Education (HFLE) (5) and the Content Outline provided to schools. The eight key principles of the National Policy for the Management of HIV/AIDS in Schools were to be emphasized, *viz*: non-discrimination and equality, no justification for HIV screening to deny admission or disallow continued attendance, with the right of HIV positive students to attend educational institutions as long as they were able, consistent with statutory requirements, and no one is compelled to disclose his/her HIV status to the institution or employer although voluntary disclosure is encouraged, and an enabling environment should be cultivated to facilitate this disclosure.

Whereas the moots reflected the content, range and depth of the Grade 1–6 HFLE Curriculum, the project experienced the first objections from a small vocal group of schools that resisted inclusion of moots which spoke to aspects of relationships and sexuality. A consequent review eliminated the moot, *‘By the time they are twelve years old, boys should be allowed to have ‘real’ girlfriends if they choose, but girls should not be permitted to have boyfriends until after their 17<sup>th</sup> birthday’*, because teachers felt this topic was too mature for primary level students.

## RESULTS

A total of 417 debates were scheduled at the in-school, cluster and preliminary rounds with 91 schools participating at the outset. Twelve schools competed in the Parish Finals. The series of debates was conducted over seven months requiring a two-month extension to the projected duration.

The debates were complemented by several significant activities targeting critical groups. Seminars were held in each educational region for parents. Similarly, workshops were convened for debate coordinators and coaches of schools which registered to participate. The positive impact of these seminars was corroborated by subsequent actions taken by parents and teachers who initiated community activities, and developed and submitted action plans. Participating schools were encouraged to promote HIV and AIDS awareness using existing school committees and groups.

As the project progressed, new ideas were incorporated to widen scope and deepen impact. Community outreach activities were undertaken to reiterate messages of prevention, nondiscrimination and de-stigmatization. Two activities

staged in rural communities attracted several hundred persons who were provided with current and relevant information. Firstly, the rural town of Black River, St Elizabeth, was galvanized by popular music in the town square, to participate in live condom demonstrations, view displays, be informed through entertainment and ascertain their HIV status. Over 300 persons were tested free of cost (5). Secondly, Scotiabank capitalized on the Annual Kite Festival in the north coast town of Seville, St. Ann, to disseminate information from booths, through storytelling and mounted displays, and to introduce debaters of the competition from the surrounding areas to an audience of thousands.

Deliberate attempts at collaboration resulted in several valuable partnerships, among them being the Macmillan Caribbean Partnership. This secured approval to dramatize two of the children’s short stories produced by Macmillan publishers and the invitation to dramatize other stories to be produced for the Caribbean. Local individuals also partnered to transcribe the two African stories into local dialect. These were dramatized by a Jamaican, the nominated International Storyteller of the Year in 2007. Musical scores for both stories, later reproduced on video, CD and DVD, were composed by an internationally known Jamaican reggae artiste. Other partnerships were activated with the Ministry of Education and Youth which provided endorsement and staff time; the Jamaica Teachers’ Association (JTA), which gave endorsement and publicity, and with NGOs such as Rise Life Management Services and Children First, which use “edutainment” to reach children and youths.

Specific achievements of the project included participation of schools from urban and rural areas, independent and government sectors and from primary, all age, preparatory, primary and junior high. Eventually, the finalists in the competition represented the preparatory and the primary and junior high school levels. The increasing poise and confidence of students became evident beginning at the parish finals. Independent opinions testify to seeing and hearing students in non-debate situations voluntarily speaking out on HIV and AIDS issues. Schools were particularly enthusiastic about the student readers, staff references and other materials provided.

Members of the NGO community expressed gratitude to Scotiabank for its lead role. Whereas incentives were announced from the outset, these were never emphasized. The careful selection and value of these was highly applauded by the audience and press when they were unveiled at the grand final, particularly the student scholarships which were not a part of the original incentive package [Figure], (7, 8).

The final debate between Hydel Preparatory and Retreat Primary and Junior High schools was a magnificent display of oratory among contenders, but represented even more. Students on both sides of the moot, *“The School is not a Suitable Setting for Students Affected by AIDS”*, demonstrated convincing maturity in their grasp of the issues. Their confidence aided by prior research and other preparations

elicited the rapt attention and vocal participation of the audience. Proposers of the moot drew attention to the systemic inadequacies – legislative, physical, human and emotional – that impede the compassionate treatment of AIDS affected students within existing schools. The opposers on the other hand galvanized their arguments around the use of existing legal frameworks, including the Child Care and Protection Act, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the National Policy for HIV/AIDS Management in Schools, and the moral obligation of the State to protect the human rights of and give hope to affected persons while ensuring education for all. Hence, both sides appreciated the humanitarian challenges and debated the best mechanisms for their resolution.

Hydel Preparatory School from the parish of St Catherine was the winning school, second place went to Retreat Primary and Junior High School from St Mary and third place went to Santa Cruz Primary from St Elizabeth. There was also a champion chosen from each of the 14 parishes in the island. Prizes organized for the competition were plaques for each Parish Champion, trophies, certificates and book vouchers for the three schools in the finals and computers for the first and second place winners. Each of the participants from the 91 schools and their coaches received a Scotiabank-branded T-Shirt with the logo of the competition, a symbolic red ribbon representing HIV/AIDS with the words **Speak Up! Speak Out!** Furthermore, on the day of the final debate, the President and CEO of Scotiabank in Jamaica was so impressed with the performance of the students that he announced that the debate would become an annual event and also added new awards: scholarships for the top three finalists valued at J\$6 838 500 or US\$95 710. The debaters from the winning school received scholarships covering seven years at high school, estimated at J\$188 500 per student, the second place winners received scholarships valuing J\$172 000 per student per annum for five years and the third place winners received a one time scholarship of J\$100 000. The total cost to the bank for coordinating the debate and securing the prizes and scholarships was approximately US\$214 000.

There were also individual and special awards. Inverness Primary and Infant with its Protection Action Plan Programme was selected *Most Supportive Group/ Individual*, Wilmington Primary produced the *Most Outstanding Parent*; the winner of the *Debate Coordinator's Prize* came from Georges Plain Primary and Pike All Age; Retreat Primary and Junior High and Wilmington Primary schools received prizes for *Outstanding Action Plans* aimed at developing activities to continue building awareness within the school and its surrounding community after the finals.

Media publicity, particularly at the beginning and leading up to the finals attracted much attention. Unsolicited reports also suggest pockets of interest were stirred in communities as the events rolled out, independent of the publicity

at the time. Subsequent to the grand final, the debate which was recorded and shown on national television was shown on the street near the bank for the benefit of Scotiabank customers and passersby.

The project has received both national and international recognition. Internationally, it has been recognized by the International Film and Video Festival which awarded the Certificate for Creative Excellence to the project. The certificate was presented at the awards ceremony in Hollywood, California, USA. The Global Business Coalition on HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, having read of the launch of the debate, offered membership to Scotiabank, recognizing the creative methods employed to build HIV and AIDS awareness.

A report of the competition was also done and presented to both the Ministry of Education and Youth and the Ministry of Health and both entities gave their support for the programme for the second year. After the grand final, the National Primary Schools HIV and AIDS Debating Competition that evolved into the *Speak Up! Speak Out!* campaign has established a platform to accelerate HIV and AIDS awareness and focus on attitude change in a more significant way.

Year two was launched on December 1, 2007, World AIDS Day, under the expanded name **Speak Up! Speak Out! National Primary Schools HIV and AIDS Education Programme**. At this function, five schools that had participated in the first debate and had submitted Action Plans to continue building awareness of HIV and AIDS in their communities were awarded grants of J\$20 000 each to carry out these activities. These were Marverly Primary and Junior High, Wilmington Primary, Retreat Primary and Junior High, Boundbrook Primary and Pike All Age. There were also testimonials from a parent and a student who had benefitted from the first debate.

A new component of the programme is the use of the performing arts to convey the message of awareness and healthy lifestyle. A partnership was forged with the Jamaica Cultural Development Commission to include in its Annual Festival of the Arts, items in the music, speech and drama categories which highlighted HIV and AIDS. Scotiabank will award prizes to the winners in each category.

## DISCUSSION

Scotiabank's decision to use the debate strategy was informed by long established practices of curriculum delivery in Jamaican schools. Strategies for teaching of English Language, Social Studies and Guidance, for example, include debating to make teaching /learning more interactive. This position is also essential in presentation of HIV/AIDS education as Smith *et al* bemoans the fact that: "*In general, the prevailing teaching method at the primary level is didactic and this remains true in relation to sex education....*" (9)

### Strategy

Iverson and Hoerer (10) and Zaleski (11) acclaim the efficacy of debating in the teaching of English Language to students. The former, having experimented with the strategy with migrant Hispanic students at the elementary grades in the USA, reported remarkable academic and social growth. Zaleski also reported successfully using debating in teaching English as a second language. Students in this project reportedly improved significantly in their academic performance and social competence. The debate strategy was also a key tool in the HIV/AIDS education programme piloted by the Kenyan Ministry of Education, Science and Technology in 1999 (12). Duflo *et al* also reported that teachers in selected schools were taught to organize debates around the issue of condom use by upper primary school students. Participating students were then required to demonstrate through an essay writing competition how much they had learnt about protecting themselves against HIV/AIDS infection then and in the future. The report indicates that there was high participation in the debates, essay writing and other school based activities, thus demonstrating the strategy's ability to attract and hold students' attention.

### Fall-out

The fallout in the number of registrants was cause for concern. Of the 294 schools registering in November 2006, only 91 (31%) entered the debate in February 2007. Explanations may be manifold. Despite attempts to inform schools in a timely manner using telephone, facsimile, email, hand delivery, text messages and the media, schools complained repeatedly of not receiving information in a timely manner. Consequently, several became frustrated and withdrew.

### Lessons learned

The culminating activities were celebratory even as the project sought to maintain its key objective of informing and building awareness. Occasions suggested a commonness of purpose among participants. Some lessons learned included: the debating strategy has great potential for catching the imagination and galvanizing the interest of teachers and students around the issues of HIV and AIDS; participation of Persons Living With HIV and AIDS (PLWHAs) is a powerful element in raising the consciousness of persons to the extent and the effect of stigma and discrimination of those affected; the residual hesitancy among some teachers to deal with



President and Chief Executive Officer of Scotiabank Jamaica and Caribbean spokesperson for Scotiabank International on AIDS awareness, William "Bill" Clarke (left) poses with winners of Scotiabank's National Primary School HIV and AIDS Debate Competition, which was held at the Chinese Benevolent Association, St Andrew, in Jamaica. Beside Mr Clarke (from right) are Natasha Patterson and Jahtonali Barrett. Grade five student Kyodi Green is in front. The students are from Hydel Primary Preparatory School. These three students along with Torian Wilson, Donique Bowie and Juellee Baker of Retreat Primary and Junior High all received scholarships for having come out on top of the competition. The St Mary School placed second.

sexual matters within the classroom is worrying but more teachers are aware of and willing to become more informed and to develop the competence to confront the sexual issues impacting students lives; the need for clear, unambiguous communication is essential in the organization and execution of the national debate; timing of extra-curricular activities such as this debate must be set, mindful of the school calendar.

### Recommendations

Based upon reflections on the processes internally and of key participants, the recommendations are: the debating competition should be regarded as one component of the larger HIV and AIDS Education Programme to be executed by Scotiabank; the competition should be repeated for another four years at least; the duration of the competition should be extended over one school year to allow more time to execute the several steps; every effort should be made to devise a more reliable system of communicating with schools; presentations by PLWHAs should continue to be a feature of competition activities and the reluctance detected among teachers to deal more openly with issues of sexuality should be discussed with the Ministry of Education and Youth in an effort to overcome this reluctance.

### CONCLUSION

The National Primary Schools HIV and AIDS Debating Competition in Jamaica was an exciting, fast-paced activity which contributed significantly to the development of teachers, students and parents. It led to the acquisition of knowledge on HIV and AIDS. More importantly, it developed skills which will be important to the students for life. The willingness of teachers who undertook this extra-curricular activity, of parents who gave their consent for stu-

dents to participate and who themselves participated, and of students who became involved, was commendable. Many lessons have been learnt during this first year of execution. Some momentum was lost in year two but debate organizers can only benefit from this experience and be better able to create greater impact in subsequent programme years.

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