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**Prime Minister and Minister for Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics, Public Service, Peoples Charter for Change and Progress, Information, iTaukei Affairs, Sugar Industry and Lands and Mineral Resources**

**SPEECH AT THE OPENING OF NEW CLASSROOM BLOCKS AND TEACHERS QUARTERS**

Vunidawa District School Thurs. 22nd May, 2014

NAITASIRI 1000 Hours

**The School Manager, Head Teacher & Staff;**

**Parents, Guardians and Members of Vunidawa;**

**Invited Guests, and Students of Vunidawa District School.**

Bula vinaka and good morning to you all.

It’s a pleasure to be with you today to celebrate the opening of new classrooms and teachers’ quarters here.

Education is the cornerstone of our nation’s future. I firmly believe that for Fiji to be a fair country in which all Fijians are equal, and a smart country, not one child can be neglected. As a nation, we must all move forward together.

That’s why my Government has taken the pressure off your parents and is providing free schooling for the first time. They don’t have to pay fees any longer for primary school or for high school. There is absolutely no reason for any Fijian student to now not finish high school.

I’m pleased to announce that the roll-out of this initiative is running smoothly. Overall, we’re receiving extremely positive feedback from parents, teachers and students.

Schools are reporting increased enrollment, improved attendance and improved punctuality.

They are reporting that the increased grants now paid by per child by government for free education have allowed them to purchase new equipment, upgrade their facilities and introduce new technology into their programs. For example, in Naitasiri, the schools here have already received grants totaling more than $1.8 million this year.

And as expected, most schools are reporting increases in student numbers. Some children have enrolled in classes for the first time and others have re-enrolled after they were forced to drop out because their parents couldn’t afford their tuition fees.

We’re still collecting information, but the 91 schools surveyed so far have revealed that a total of 215 students have re-enrolled in their classes now that tuition is free, including a mother of three who has come back to finally complete her High School Degree.

Nothing is more pleasing to me than to know that these young people have been given a second chance at their education.

As I keep telling students all over the country - there has never been a more exciting time to be a Fijian. You are growing up with more opportunity than any child has had in Fijian history, whether your sights are set on finishing your high school or whether your academic ambitions extend even further.

If you want to go on to University to become a doctor or a teacher, or to a technical college to become a farmer or a carpenter or a mariner, we will pay for that too. You’ll be able to get a loan from the Government for this and pay us back when you start work.

But if you study hard and become one of the top 600 students, no matter who you are and who your parents are, you will get a scholarship which you do not have to pay back. We are also, under the Tertiary Education Scheme, providing living subsidies for those from low – income families.

All these initiatives are geared at giving you the best possible opportunities to succeed in life and take the nation forward with you.

In return, I ask all of you to work hard at your studies. For your parent’s sake, for your country’s sake but especially for your own sake. Because if you work hard here, all sorts of doors will open up to you and a world of opportunity will be at your feet.

I want you children to think of yourselves as part of a team – Team Fiji – in which we all work together as a nation like a sporting team to make Fiji Great.

I’m very pleased that my Government was able to fund the work for a new classroom block and teachers’ quarters here at Vunidawa District School, totaling more than $137,000.

We also carried out classroom renovations and built new teachers’ quarters for your neighbour, the Vunidawa Sanatan Dharam School, totaling more than $100,000.

And I’m told that the construction of a dining hall and kitchen facility at Naitasiri Provincial High School across the river will begin soon.

I’m pleased because these facilities will immediately improve the quality of teaching and learning in this part of Fiji. Teachers are an integral part of the education system and we must ensure that their conditions of employment are conducive to them giving their best.

With those words, ladies and gentlemen, I now have much pleasure in officially declaring the classrooms and new teachers’ quarters open.

Vinaka Vakalevu. Thank you.

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