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The high cost of education

By Petulia Clarke, Staff Reporter

THE DEBATE between the major political parties regarding the expenses involved in educating Jamaica's youth and whether it should be free, broaches an issue that many parents grapple with each year as September rolls around.

Education Minister Burchell Whiteman says free secondary education is impractical, while Opposition Leader Edward Seaga bemoans the current system, asking for "justice" for the hundreds of parents of secondary school students who just can't make ends meet this school year.

But, while the debate rages, parents at the lower end of the scale - those with primary school-aged children - are also biting nails. While they may not be paying fees yet, other costs, skyrocketing into tens of thousands of dollars, have set them back.

Not counting optional preparatory schools, where fees alone range between \$15,000 and \$30,000 per term, excluding 'sides' like extra curricular costs, the primary school child is now costing his/her parents anywhere between \$5000 and \$10,000 in pre-September costs, and will cost thousands of dollars more during the term. Early childhood education can also be a huge financial burden, but how much each parent spends is totally dependent on that individual's choice of school.

Manchester mother of two primary school-aged children, Jacinth Barnes, said she has spent about \$2,500 per child so far. The money has so far been spent on shoes, school bags and other miscellaneous items. She pays insurance to the school at \$350 per child per term in case they're hurt while at school, and she plans to give each \$100 per day for lunch when school reopens.

Schoolbags have been advertised at discounted prices, but can cost anywhere from \$250 to thousands of dollars, shoes can be had for \$150 up; lunch kits cost \$200 up, and khaki shirts and pants from \$200. Girls' white blouses retail at stores in downtown Kingston each for \$130 up, and for physical education, shorts, socks and other items could run into thousands of dollars.

Mrs. Barnes is worried about the start of high school next year for a younger son, as she has been struggling to find her stepdaughter's \$5,500 school fee. She gets assistance through the Government's cost-sharing programme, which absorbs \$2,500 of the fees.

Her elder sister, whose daughter Lori Stewart will be entering second form at a St. Catherine high school in September, isn't so lucky. She's not eligible for the cost sharing programme and will have to fork more than \$10,500, which includes the cost of book rental and medical for the year.

Under the cost-sharing programme, parents now pay between \$4,500 and \$8,500 in school fees and between 10 and 20 per cent of the total cost of schooling their children. The Government pays at least 80 per cent, giving schools between \$30,000 and \$39,000 per student per year.

Students who will benefit from the soon-to-be-implemented PATHE (Programme for Advancement through Health and Education) will not have to pay school fees and this is to ensure that the students attend school regularly. One of the aims of PATHE is to break the inter-generational cycle of poverty, through regular attendance at school. Students who benefit from the programme must attend classes at

least 85 per cent of the times and will be exempted from paying the cost-sharing portion of their education.

For other students, high school fees range from a low of \$5,000 to near \$20,000, depending on the school and the level of inclusions. Some fees include book rental and insurance, and books that are not covered under the rental scheme can run into thousands of dollars. Lori said lunch money per day is \$200, taxi fare \$30, cadet dues \$10 per day and combat shoes \$1,500.

There are much higher financial costs to maintain a tertiary student with the Government funding as much as 80 per cent in most degree programmes. Tertiary education is an expensive proposition regardless of whether studies are done locally or abroad.

Students preparing for, or already pursuing tertiary education, need to budget not only for tuition fees, but for other related expenses. These include accommodation, clothing, meals, school equipment and textbooks.

At the University of the West Indies (UWI), Mona, according to the principal's report for 2001, students continue to receive financial aid through bursaries and scholarships from various sources. The report said the total value of bursaries awarded to students from those sources for the previous academic year totalled \$3.25 million.

Scholarships are awarded to students, usually based on academic merit. Bursaries are usually larger than those given for grants, but smaller than those for scholarships. The Government, through the Ministry of Education and Culture, awards about 112 scholarships each year that pay tuition, book allowance and go towards maintenance.

An estimate of books for all faculties for full-time students, according to the UWI's website, is \$21,500, while it costs about \$10,750 for part-time students. Meals costs between \$300 and \$500 per day. The cost for residence in halls for about 38 weeks in the academic year is \$65,750 for single rooms and \$50,759 for double rooms.

Off campus estimates are from \$7,500 for shared bedrooms to \$18,000 per month for a one-bedroom flat. Other miscellaneous fees at UWI include guild fees at \$1,446 for full-time and part-time students, \$2,250 for health fees, \$1,100 for hall attachment fee and \$800 for caution money, all of them mandatory payments.

The annual tuition for non-sponsored new students is a little more than \$100,000, and more than \$500,000 for students from non-contributing countries. (Only governments from some Caribbean countries contribute towards tuition).

At the University of Technology (UTech), throughout the academic year students are assisted through the administering of a wide variety of awards, bursaries and scholarships donated by firms, industrial enterprises, Government agencies and concerned individuals. These are normally awarded on the basis of performance at the University after the student's first or second year. Students, whose total fees can run into hundreds of thousands, are assisted through grants, emergency loans and part-time employment.

Off-dorm Northern Caribbean University (NCU) students pay around \$50,000 per semester, while those living on would pay up to \$100,000 per semester. Additional fees include paying for insurance, Internet use, club fees and other miscellaneous items.

Community colleges like the Portmore Community College offer courses for about \$30,000 for the year for a full-time student. The student can take between four and six subjects for this fee. Other items like compulsory T-shirts cost between \$500 and \$600. Those fees do not include expenses for books, meals and transport.