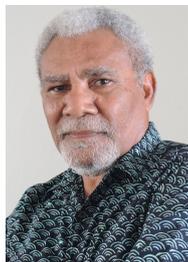


**Public statement
by Rt Hon Sir Mekere Morauta
Port Moresby, 7 June 2017**

Education – our Future



Prime Minister Peter O'Neill should not be making boastful statements, as he did this week, about his failed free education policy. He should be apologising to the nation's children instead, and telling us how he plans to arrest the further deterioration of the system.

The waste, mismanagement and corruption in his Tuition Fee Free policy, coupled with his uncaring and irresponsible spending cuts over the past few years, have brought the education system to its knees.

"Since 2015 Mr O'Neill has cut education spending in the Budget (excluding teachers' salaries) by 40 percent in real terms, from K1.7 billion to K1.2 billion in 2017. The 2017 Budget also details his plans for further cuts of 30 percent by 2021," former Prime Minister Sir Mekere Morauta said today.

"Mr O'Neill should not forget that free education was MY policy, instituted by MY government in 2001. It was a success. It did not result in the hopeless mess that Mr O'Neill has caused."

The National Research Institute, in a special report on education earlier this year, stated that since TFF was implemented in 2012, the "quality of basic education continued to deteriorate.

"At present, the declining Quality of Learning, in particular in basic education, is a major concern." it reported.

Sir Mekere said that in effect, Mr O'Neill's TFF policy is jeopardising the future of Papua New Guinea's children. "He is making things worse for them, rather than better," he said.

People are no longer fooled by Mr O'Neill's empty boasting. They see for themselves the late arrival of TFF funds, or non-arrival in some cases. They see school closures, dilapidated classrooms filled to bursting point, teachers without teaching materials, a lack of school equipment.

They see teachers not being paid their full entitlements, schools still charging fees, school principals being suspended. The Education Department is at crisis point trying to deal with Mr O'Neill's badly planned and under-funded policy.

"Free education is a right of all children, and it is an investment in the future of the nation," Sir Mekere said. "I introduced it because everything I have achieved in life has a foundation in the free education I received. My parents never had to pay any fees and I owe PNG a debt of gratitude for that.

"I am thankful for that opportunity and I wanted to give the present generation the same chance I had."

But Sir Mekere said the government paying school fees is only a very small part of educating a child. The elements missing from Mr O'Neill's policy include proper planning and funding, adequate facilities and educational materials and well-trained teachers who have decent accommodation.

The education system was already struggling before Mr O'Neill came along – now it has failed, just as his health policy has failed.

The NRI report, citing Grade 8 exam results, states that despite improvements in access to basic education, evidence shows that overall the quality of learning in basic education is low and is steadily declining. "The Grade 8 examination results ... remain unsatisfactory and are far below expectations," it said.

The report also cites poor school governance, a poor school organisational climate, inadequate or poor school infrastructure, lack of curriculum and reading materials, ineffective teaching, lack of on-going teacher professional development and implementation of the curriculum, and unqualified teachers.

"What is worst of all, though, is that Mr O'Neill will not admit the deterioration and under-funding of the education system, though he clearly knows it," Sir Mekere said. "Why else would he have asked Australia in March this year to provide direct funding support for the education budget from its K1.5 billion aid?"

"The only solution is a well-planned, well funded reform program supported by our international friends and agencies that restores our government system in a systematic way over a number of years. There is no magic wand to fix Mr O'Neill's mess."