

Good morning friends, colleagues, and fellow believers in Nigeria's bright future. On this auspicious day, I would like to welcome you to the 12th Anniversary of the Inoyo Toro Foundation, and the Annual Teachers' Award for Teaching Excellence. It is my pleasure and honour to have been invited to be the Chairman of this event, as the Inoyo Toro Foundation is an organisation that is very dear to my heart.

Today, in giving my opening remarks, I would also like to invite you all on a short trip down memory lane. How many of us remember a time when public school education was the best gift Nigerian parents could give their children? I know some of you youngsters might be looking at my grey hair, but I can assure you that it was not that long ago (or may be it was, depending on who is making the assessment). At that time, entrance examinations into secondary schools funded by Federal or State governments were some of the most competitive and crucial tests of scholarly aptitude for young Nigerians. Students dedicated sleepless nights to their preparations, and parents announced their children's admission into these public schools with great pride.

How many of us seated here today are products of these public schools? Even if you yourself did not attend one of these schools, then you most certainly work and socialise with people who did. Many of us are ourselves members, or have close links with members of the various old boys and old girls associations that have sprung from these schools. Many of the young ones look up to alumni of these schools. This is why I am confident that we are all disheartened by the decline that these great schools have experienced.

A good number of us at this event have adult children. Can I get a show of hands for all those who placed their children in those same public schools that our parents held in such high esteem? Now, I would like a show of hands for those who would encourage their grandchildren to attend these schools.

So, tell me, my friends. What changed? As some of you may know, my beloved mother of blessed memory, Deaconess Georgina Ukpanah, was a teacher – among others, she taught at Anglican Girls Grammar School, Enugu before the civil war and subsequently, at the prestigious Edgerly Memorial Girls Secondary School in Calabar (I hope it's still prestigious). Growing up under her care, I was a firsthand witness to the passion, dedication, resourcefulness and indeed sacrifice that she brought to her job on a daily basis. The responsibility of nurturing, guiding and educating the next generation was one that she took just as seriously as her responsibility to us, her biological children. My mother was a God-fearing woman, and she showed me that the work of teaching is a calling as divine as any other because there is nothing more precious in the sight of God than young children.

And yet, the value that we place today on education, and more importantly, on the teachers who provide this education, is diminishing. Nigerian society undervalues the impact and importance of its teachers, and unfortunately, the brunt of this is borne by our children, and thus, our future. It is not the case that the teachers of today are simply no longer interested in building up the next generation. Rather, the sad truth is that our priorities as a nation and as a society have changed, and not for the better.

Those of us who remember when public schools were prestigious and highly sought after will also agree when I say that Nigerian society is no longer what it used to be. In the era of great public education, the values of hard work, commitment, integrity, and service to God and society were embraced by all. In addition, the funding, infrastructural investment and other resources provided

by the government to our schools ensured that teachers worked in a conducive environment and received compensation that was commensurate to their efforts.

Today, this is no longer the case. I can go into the details of how bad the current situation is, but I am sure that most of us in the room are well aware. Still, I must assert that it is not enough for us to fold our arms and complain about the rot that has eaten deep not just into our education system, but into our society as a whole. Those of us who understand what is at stake must take action, and I am proud to say that some among us already have. Today, and in front of this illustrious audience, it is my great privilege to commend the work being done by the Inoyo Toro Foundation. For over a decade, they have been at the forefront of the crusade to improve public education in Akwa Ibom State, by championing the people at the very heart of this crucial service – the teachers. I am delighted to inform you that one of the award winning teachers in the Grand Mentors' category in 2018 took the 6th Position in the National Teachers & School Excellence Award held at Eagle Square Abuja to commemorate the 2019 Teachers' Day. Also, another teacher in one of our public schools won the 2019 Maltina Teachers Award in Chemistry category.

Without committed, industrious and forward-thinking teachers, our children have no hope. Some of us might have the means to pay the exorbitant amounts charged by today's private schools, just to guarantee our children the same quality of education that was provided by public schools not too long ago. But such people are not the majority, and Nigeria cannot be delivered into its bright and promising future only by the children of the elite. After all, if only the children of the rich are able to access good education delivered by committed teachers, how will our great nation ever escape from the trap of placing the pursuit of wealth above integrity and hard work?

Our society must return to the values that were instilled in us not just by our parents, but also by the exemplary teachers many of us were privileged to be shaped by. The Inoyo Toro Foundation is leading by example here in Akwa Ibom State by giving honour to whom it is due, and this is why I have been a firm supporter of their work for the past twelve years. I am proud to be the sponsor of the Mathematics prize in honour of my late mother, Deaconess Georgina Ukpanah, who dedicated several years of her life to teaching young Nigerians how to unlock the secrets of that vital yet highly unpopular subject. I am also proud to note that the success of the Inoyo Toro Foundation is inspiring others to recognise and reward outstanding teachers and educators in other states of the Federation and elsewhere.

Dear Friends, I don't want to take too much of your time. We are here to celebrate some very special people today. These people are, quite literally, the custodians of our great nation's future. Every day, they provide young Nigerians with knowledge and important life skills. They conduct themselves as examples of sound values, good morals and ethical conduct. By thriving in environments that can be sometimes difficult or even unrewarding, they model persistence, perseverance and dedication to the impressionable children who are in their care. They are our precious and powerful teachers.

There is a quote I saw which I liked: "Teachers plant the seeds of knowledge that last a lifetime". Profound! But I wonder, if teachers are neglected, unempowered, lack confidence, and undervalued, what seeds are they planting! Hmmm. Perhaps we should ponder over that. Maybe that is why we have a society such as ours that seem to glorify and would readily accept as leaders those who are manifestly corrupt with ill-gotten wealth to the detriment of hardwork, commitment and integrity!

As I close today, I implore us all to always bear in mind the importance and impact of our teachers. For those of us who remember what our public schools were once like, we must remember that at that time, our teachers were held in high esteem and duly rewarded for their work. This recognition of the role and value of teachers was the most crucial aspect of what made public schools so excellent. Therefore, as responsible citizens, we must continue to remind our leaders of their responsibility towards the custodians of our future. We must also support organisations like the Inoyo Toro Foundation even as they stand in the gap for these exemplary and honourable citizens.

This we must do for ourselves, our children, our society and our future.

God bless our teachers. God bless Akwa Ibom State. God bless Nigeria.

Thank you for your attention.