

**Speech made by Prime Minister at the Association of International
Schools in Sri Lanka
Awards ceremony - Kurunegala Town Hall,
July 20, 2009 at 10.00 a.m.**

I must confess that I have not been a great champion or sponsor of International Schools. I have been, not unreasonably, under the impression that what are known as International Schools are alien institutions which alienate our children from their cultural heritage and distort their values, making them misfits in the country of their birth.

Perhaps my fears have been unjustified. I don't know. However, it is that doubt that persuaded me to accept the invitation to be present here as the Chief Guest today. And I must say that I am somewhat re-assured by a statement by a sponsor of this event that generally International Schools based in the Provinces are supportive of indigenous languages, religions and culture and, importantly, the education system of Sri Lanka. And, the Association of International schools which has organized this awards ceremony here today is comprised, I believe, of mostly provincial international schools. So, I can in good faith leave my misgivings at rest.

Education is a priceless gift to any child. His or her entire future is shaped by it. But education could not be a priceless pearl if it makes the child a misfit in the land of its birth. The International schools in this Association, I trust, will not be guilty of that, even though the medium of instruction they impart is in an alien tongue.

Why should instruction be in English in these particular schools? The answer lies in the very title- International School. Affluent parents fondly believe that an "English education" would give their children a privileged place in life - even if that life is in another country, away from the land of their birth. I say "affluent parents" because only the affluent send their children to International Schools; the poor cannot afford the fees. Perhaps the poor are more fortunate, because their children will remain with them in this country, while the children of the affluent whose education has been in English would most often fly away to other lands where their English too would help them find more lucrative employment. Be that as it may, education in any language is better than no education, and even if the few fly away many will remain, to give solace to their parents, and to give the benefit of their education to their country.

Parents naturally wish to give the best possible education to their children. And even though the schools in the state system may offer the best facilities and opportunities some cannot find a place in the best of them. The International Schools come to their rescue. Some may even think that these schools offer better opportunities, because the medium of instruction is in English. In our democratic country people are free to choose.

Let me also at this point assure you that education in English does not necessarily alienate the child. In my time the medium of instruction in all big urban school was in English. Only the rural village schools taught in Swabasha. I too was taught in English - and that at Ananda, a leading Sinhala Buddhist school. And I certainly was not alienated. So I suppose it all depends on the character and the quality of the education, and the environment and atmosphere of the school. As I said earlier, I am somewhat re-assured about the International Schools in this Association - they are mostly Provincial schools; so the environment and the atmosphere should be conducive to a proper perspective on values and worth.

On that happy note of reassurance let me end, with my congratulations for those who have won awards and with my best wishes for their future and the future of their schools.

Thank you.