



**New Year Address
by the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
1 January 2005**

Fellow Icelanders

My wife and I wish you all a Happy New Year and hope as many of you as possible are at peace and rejoicing in your hearts, rejoicing at the opportunities and hopes linked to the New Year, happiness at gains made in the past. However, many have had to bear heavy ordeals, tackle illness and setbacks, have struggled and despaired, yearned for well-being and peace.

We send our deepest sympathies to all those who are suffering due to the terrible catastrophe of the tsunami that struck distant shores, and we urge the nations of the world to join hands in relief work.

The end of the year is often a time of sorrow and nostalgia. We think of departed loved ones and find it difficult to understand how fate can be so adverse to many people, but we also praise the courage and energy that reinvigorate life, and in children at play we see hope and faith in the future.

We Icelanders have had the good fortune to live in a society characterised by care and consideration. Free from anxieties, we have kept our houses open, young people have walked without hesitation or hindrance through all doors. Now we hear reports of increasingly tough and ruthless battles in the world of shadows, the underworld driven by the craving for drugs where inhumanity, brutality and violence leave their mark on everyday life.

In the weeks leading up to Christmas books appeared relating fateful stories of young people who have ended up in the grip of drugs, roamed the streets of squalor and fear. Family and friends make great sacrifices to give these unfortunates a glimpse of hope.

Evidence of a chilling and terrifying reality is presented in these books and also repeatedly in the press and media, in reports of the work of police and the courts, in accounts of growing violence and thuggery.

Much work remains to be done: to launch a collective campaign to purge ourselves of this scourge, light up the world of shadows and clean it up beyond recognition.

This is in the interest of us all, because experience shows that no one knows who is next, that children and young people from all kinds of backgrounds are among the victims, that just a moment from now the battle line could be drawn through our own homes.

My wife and I have decided to provide some input of our own, to offer our services in the battle against this scourge, join all those who now wish to team up, and launch a dialogue with young people who have suffered harsh experiences, their families and friends and helpers, bring out lessons to learn from all those responsible.

We are also prepared to seek out ideas from people in other countries and consult those who have achieved results on their home ground, build up a stock of suggestions and helpful advice from those who have previously been in the same position as the Icelanders are now.

We need to take care to keep evil forces at bay, prevent foreign crime rings from taking root in Iceland.

Unfortunately no simple solutions are at hand, no fast tracks to total victory, but we all have a part to play in the new defence force that needs to be mobilised, to defend the peace and security of Icelandic reality.

At stake is the welfare of our children, their future, success and health; and the incentive involves being able to grant them the same good fortune that we enjoyed when we were young.

Upbringing and education have long been a strong strand in the fabric of the Icelanders' culture and identity, ever since the ancient sagas extolled the virtues of the guardians whose job in those days was to teach and rear children.

“He brought everyone to some degree of maturity”, Snorri Sturluson wrote [in the 13th century] of Erlingur Skjálgsson, and ever since it has been considered praiseworthy to bestow such care on one's contemporaries.

Teaching was for a long time one of the duties of the family, until society was radically transformed and the modern age changed much of the old order. Schools were built all over the country, formed the core of regional development, and the establishment of the University of Iceland in the early days of Home Rule was a goal that the whole nation strove for.

Early last century, Icelanders were fully aware that universal schooling, a versatile force of teachers and wide-reaching education were the preconditions for success, that the roots of progress lie in colourful and dynamic learning. The Icelandic College of Education, together with the University of Iceland, became a key institution in a powerful move forward.

Research by experts the world over has now shown that the education of young people is the best form of investment, that nations excel by giving priority to instruction and upbringing, by viewing schools as the main driver of future prosperity. Even nations lacking virtually all conventional resources have reached the forefront by putting schools and the educational system at the top of the agenda.

Experience shows that resources on land or at sea, waterfalls, mines and oil deposits, are worth little if there is no team of well educated people to capitalise on such opportunities.

We Icelanders have also clearly seen recently that vigorous international expansion by entrepreneurs from our own ranks, the boosting of global trade and the growth of Icelandic companies to become leaders in the Nordic countries, Europe and even farther afield, is especially due to an educated and talented group of people who have reaped the benefits of their schooling so spectacularly.

Yes, schools are definitely the power stations of the future, the fount of prosperity for years to come. The child is father of the man. It is in the primary schools that the nation's well-being and progress is determined. Without strong education there, it may prove difficult for us to keep pace with other countries.

Enhancing primary schooling is therefore not just an educational issue in the sense traditionally understood in the corridors of power; it is also an employment issue, a business issue, an industrial issue, an energy issue; in fact the basis for success and advances in all fields.

The future of primary schools is not only a task for central and local government. The stakes are also high for industry, businesses, everyone who runs anything. People often talk of cooperation between the home and the school and while they definitely share the upbringing of children, it must not be forgotten that the business community also has strong interests at stake, and should naturally make its own contribution towards strengthening and supporting schools.

Children are truly our most precious jewels, a source of joy and happiness to their parents, a priceless treasure. But children are also the

key to the future well-being of society, to prosperity and welfare in the new century.

It is crucial for us not to ruin such a resource, but rather to cultivate and strengthen it in every possible way. Only by doing this can we secure Iceland's economic future, demonstrate that we have fully comprehended the truth that education is the most lucrative investment available to us, yielding higher dividends than power stations, roads and factories, to name other sought-after options.

However, eloquent speeches on solemn occasions about the value of education only go so far; we have to prove the nation's commitment by our actions. It must never happen again, that the first experience children have of school is months of idleness due to a dispute between those who are endowed with responsibility.

We must create a wide-reaching consensus – achieve, as the newspaper Morgunblaðið pointed out recently, nationwide solidarity on excellent schools, schools that excel for their quality, their open access for all, the egalitarianism that prevails in them, excellent schools that in no respect discriminate between children according to the financial position of their parents.

School needs to be a comprehensive forum for study and instruction, leisure, sports and artistic activity, for development and training that equip children in many fields – in effect a living centre for upbringing in which parents and family lend a helping hand. On this issue we have much to learn from other countries which have forged better link between the home and the school than we have managed to do.

Nationwide unity on the work of schools is one of the most pressing tasks for the new year, in which everyone needs to be involved: not just the state and municipal authorities, but also homes and businesses.

We must not continue to pass on the responsibility to others: the parents to the teachers, the schools to the homes, the local authorities to the state and the state to everyone else.

We are all collectively responsible and the enhancement of the school system is vital for us all. We need to strengthen it so that, at the same time, we can improve the culture of the home, bring greater happiness to families, make young people more independent and more disposed to a healthy, wholesome lifestyle, steer them clear of the risks that dwell in the underworld, the world of shadows I discussed earlier.

However, preconditions for this will always be to treat teachers with respect, appreciate the true value of teaching and make it a sought-after job, create contentment and pride within the profession.

Without quality teachers we can never make primary schools into excellent schools.

Those of us who are older remember teachers who enriched our studies and thereby paved the way that our lives would follow. We need to ensure young people the same kind of opportunities and we have a wide range of options for doing so.

Every year the President of Iceland presents awards to those who excel in the fields of business and literature. The President of Iceland's Award for Export Achievement is a sought-after and prestigious honour, and the Icelandic Literary Prize is an important event on the cultural scene, awarded annually here at Bessastaðir.

Education, no less than exports and literature, is one of the cornerstones of our future welfare and I feel that the time has come to give it the place of honour that it deserves.

I have therefore decided to establish an Icelandic Education Award which, together with the Literary Prize and the Export Award, will be the main presidential award.

The Icelandic Education Award will be for the most part dedicated to primary school activities, which are one of the most important areas for cultivating and creating a long-lasting consensus. The idea is to present the award in four categories:

- To schools that have been engaged in innovation or have shown long-term effectiveness in their teaching.
- To teachers who have made noteworthy contributions during their careers or have otherwise excelled.
- To young teachers displaying dedication and talent at the start of their careers.
- To authors of textbooks that have laid the foundation for new teaching methods.

Extensive cooperation will be sought to launch the Icelandic Education Award as a prestigious prize and nominations will be requested from parents, pupils, teachers and everyone who values the work of schools.

I hope that the Icelandic Education Award, like its two predecessors, will be an object of national pride, an indication of forthcoming unanimity on excellent schools for our children, the herald of a new and better attitude, a contribution towards appreciation of the true value of teachers' work.

In this fine country of ours we can have a splendid future if we all work together, preserve the sense of community that has long served this nation best, make every effort to enhance the qualities on which the Icelanders' success and prosperity have been built.

The last century was bountiful for us and created more opportunities than ever before. Our children and descendants must not have poorer options in the future.

I wish you all, near and far, every success and hope that good luck and blessings will always follow the people of Iceland.