

EDUCATION BEAT

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Common Core, Community Outreach and Teacher Support Opens 2014-2015



Department of Education officials hit the ground running in September, marking the opening of the new school year

with everything from intense teacher training workshops to community expos that showcased the Department's major initiatives.

The brainchild of Education Commissioner Donna Frett-Gregory, the educational expos were held on all three islands and gave parents and other key stakeholders the chance to dialogue with VIDE officials about ongoing programs and initiatives, as well changes being made within the classrooms during the school year.

"I saw a clear need for more parent outreach," Frett-Gregory said recently.

"We needed to develop an event that we could hold every year, or twice a year that, would give parents the chance to actually see what we're doing and how some of the things that we are putting in place will ultimately benefit their children. We needed to also give our stakeholders — and we had everyone from our own staff to this year's political aspirants attend — the ability to talk to us face to face, the chance to ask questions about our projects and get back tangible answers, and of course, the opportunity to see our students in action.



I'm encouraged by the way the events came together. On each island, we had different popula-

tions represented, and I think as long as we keep doing this, eventually, everyone will be more informed about our work and our stu-

dents' accomplishments."

Back-to-school expos were followed this year by a series of workshops welcoming new teachers. As recruitment efforts within the Department continue, Frett-Gregory has continued to be candid with stakeholders about current teaching shortages and what's being done to boost the numbers while also making the effort to ensure that new recruits are acclimated and receiving the resources or support they need.



Support through professional development has also been offered to teachers and administrators on two major Department initiatives: the continued implementation of the Common Core State Standards and VIDE's new teacher/leader evaluation system.

Since the beginning of the 2014-2015 school year, three Common Core workshops have been offered to educators, which, according to VIDE officials, focused more on new teaching strategies aligned to new English Language Arts and Math standards.

"Continuing with our efforts to ensure that our students are ready, upon graduation, for college or a career, the Department is supporting our teachers by providing ongoing training for the Common Core State Standards," Alexandria Baltimore-Hookfin, VIDE's State Assessment Director, explained recently. "The second part of this training continues Nov. 3rd and 10th, and we hope in this that our teachers will gain more knowledge about implementing the standards, while learning about increased text complexity and writing using evidence from the text. We understand that the Common Core State Standards are not only new for our students, but new for our teachers as well, so we're really trying to

offer as much support as possible so that we can, ultimately, improve learning and achievement outcomes for our students.

St. Thomas-St. John and St. Croix school districts also took time this month to delve into training sessions focused on the implementation of a new teacher/leader evaluation system based on standards approved in early October by the Commissioner's Policy Committee.

The final approved document was the culmination of six months of work put in by a

dedicated task force made up of VIDE



officials and key stakeholders that studied research and best practices from across the country and made recommendations for creating new components of a, evaluation system that better identifies, supports, and develops effective educators and principals.

A pilot study to test the new system was conducted in the Spring of 2014, while full implementation is expected in this fall "For teachers, the new standards look at everything from classroom performance to interactions with parents and families, while standards for administrators focus on areas such as planning, professionalism, and maintaining an instructional environment, among other things. The system is not meant to be punitive, but rather give teachers and administrators the feedback they need about their work and performance in the classroom. On the state level, it also commits us to providing the kind of professional development our teachers and administrators need in order to be even more effective in the classroom, Frett-Gregory said.

Commissioner's MESSAGE



Education Commissioner Donna Frett-Gregory



Greetings!

As we move toward the end of our first 2014-2015 marking period, I just have to say what an awesome few months we've had so far. As we closed out the last school year, there were a number of initiatives that we hoped to expand, or were in the process of implementing, and it is a pleasure to see how much progress was made in these areas over the summer and the beginning of the new school year. The theme I've seen evolving is one of support and facilitating a collaboration between state and district offices, between schools and between educators and administrators.

The most important initiative, of course, continues to be the implementation of the Common Core State Standards and providing the necessary professional development for our educators and support staff. In keeping with my commitment to professional development we organized a series of workshops at the beginning of the school year and I have continued to be overwhelmed by the positive response and encouraging feed-

back. I commend all of you for continuing to support this effort, as it is so important for us to align our teaching strategies and methodologies to this new educational shift, which I believe will truly prepare our students for college or life in the global workplace. As we gear up for another set of sessions next week, we are already seeing an overall improvement: increased rigor in the lesson plans, more collaboration between teachers and the creation of assessments that are more in line with the standards. Despite our challenges, the Department has also remained true to its priority of boosting teacher/leader effectiveness through a system that better identifies, supports and develops successful educators and principals. To support the system, we have also held related professional development workshops that have also garnered an overwhelming amount of support from participants and we look forward, over the next few months, to providing similar opportunities for growth.

We believe that the success of our

educators also ties directly into the success of our students and to support all groups, we are currently wrapping up work on the Department's first-ever strategic plan, which will help us lay a clear blueprint for our future and inform the work that we do.

This document is truly a collaborative effort between all of our internal and external stakeholders and in it, we have set critical goals, looked at meeting realistic milestones and stayed true to our three state priorities.

Moving forward, it is essential that we continue this collaboration and stay committed to cause of student success. Over the next few months, let us build upon what we've been able to accomplish this past school year, and inform our efforts toward boosting the quality of our public education system as we strive, collectively, to empower all of our students for success!

BLURBS: IN THE NEWS....

Dionne Wells Named Interim St. Thomas-St. John Superintendent

St. Thomas-St. John Superintendent Jeanette Smith-Barry retired in September 2014 after 42 years with the Department, and Sprauve School Principal Dionne Wells was tapped to take her place.

Elena Christian's Rocketry Team Among Nation's Top 25

The enterprising Rocketry Club improved their ranking to 21st overall this year at the Team America Rocketry Challenge out of 101 finalists from 48 other states and territories.

Low Muckle Observes Nation-

al Day on Writing

Several educators, journalists, poets and storytellers participated in the 2014 National Day on Writing workshop at Lew Muckle, which spotlighted teachers involved with the V.I. Writing Project.

Claude O. Markoe Celebrates National Hispanic Heritage Month

The St. Croix Educational Complex team took top honors during the first ever KidWind Challenge.

Ulla F. Muller's Mock Election Teaches Importance of Voting

Students from all Ulla F. Muller

Elementary worked with parents and teachers to learn about the voting process and this year's candidates.

St. Croix District Holds Common Core Sessions

The St. Croix School District recently conducted a leadership academy for administrators, aspiring administrators, teachers and support staff that focused on Common Core implementation.

Positive Behavioral Intervention Support (PBIS) Rolled Out Territory-Wide

Lew Muckle Elementary was the first school to roll out this program, which stresses respect between teachers and students, positive language, shared conflict management and resolution.

VIDE Honors 2015 District Teachers of the Year

St. Thomas-St. John and St. Croix Superintendents celebrated this month the selection of their 2015 District Teachers of the Year: Mrs. Jeune



Provost from the Julius Sprauve School and Mrs. Juliette Heddad-Miller, from St. Croix's Lew Muckle Elementary.

"This is truly an honor," Provost, a third-grade teacher at Sprauve, said after the announcement was made. "I take on this responsibility with pride and humility and it is my hope that I can use my role as St. Thomas-St.

John District Teacher of the Year to help educators in my district achieve successful, engaging, and inspiring classrooms across our beautiful islands. I am so thankful to my colleagues, but most of all to my family for their continued and unconditional support. I am truly blessed."

Now in her second year at Sprauve, Provost identifies with a simple teaching philosophy: that every child has the ability to learn through inspiration, imagination, and a teacher's dedication.

"I believe it is my responsibility to inspire students by providing a caring

and stimulating environment, where they can grow, mature and take risks free of embarrassment."

A second grade teacher at Lew Muckle Elementary, St. Croix's Teacher of the Year Juliette Heddad-Miller is of the same mindset.



"I try to reach the children by understanding where they are in the beginning, and what they need to learn to get them to move forward," Heddad-Miller, who also works as an intervention teacher at Lew Muckle, said. "The job of a teacher is to know what makes a child tick, and to determine — because children learn at all different levels and speeds — how best to help them succeed."

Now in her sixth year of teaching on St. Croix, Heddad-Miller said she has been exposed to a cadre of "brilliant" elementary teachers, all of whom are just as passionate about helping their students learn.

"To be chosen for this, among all of the greatest and best that we have, I am truly honored," she added.

Ricardo Richards, Pearl B. Larsen Elementaries Earn Blue Ribbon Status



Ricardo Richards and Pearl B. Larsen elementary schools

on St. Croix were recognized this month as 2014 National Blue Ribbon Schools.

U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan made the official announcement earlier this afternoon, recognizing 337 schools (287 public schools, and 50 private) across the states and territories. The National Blue Ribbon Program recognizes schools based on their overall academic excellence or their progress in closing achievement gaps among student subgroups.

The award affirms the hard work of students, educators, families and communities in creating safe and welcoming schools where students master challenging content.

"These great schools are fulfilling the promise of American education—that all students, no matter their name or

zip code, can flourish when schools provide safe, creative, and challenging learning environments," Secretary Duncan said in a statement Tuesday. "National Blue Ribbon Schools are models of consistent excellence and a resource for other schools and districts. We celebrate them for their tireless effort and boundless creativity in reaching and teaching every student.

All schools are recognized in one of two performance categories, based on all student scores, subgroup student scores and graduation rates.

Exemplary High Performing Schools are among their state's highest performing schools as measured by state assessments or nationally normed tests. Student subgroup performance and high school graduation rates are also at the highest levels.

Exemplary Achievement Gap Closing Schools are among their state's highest performing schools in closing achievement gaps between a school's subgroups and all students

over the past five years. Student subgroup performance and high school graduation rates for each subgroup are at high levels. Specifically, for the 2013-2014 award year, the U.S. Department of Education strengthened the focus of both categories' performance criteria around subgroups within a school and improving graduation rates for all students.

This is truly exciting news," Education Commissioner Donna Frett-Gregory said after the announcement was made. "This award speaks volumes about the quality of our public schools here in the territory. Both Pearl B. Larsen and Ricardo Richards are exemplary early learning environments, which put emphasis on each child, how they learn, and what they need in order to fully develop. I congratulate both school teams for all their hard work, along with our St. Croix District team for continuing to put in the resources and time needed for these schools to excel."

For a complete listing of this year's Blue Ribbon Schools, visit: <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/nclbbrs/2014/national.pdf>



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Mission Statement:

The Virgin Islands Department of Education is committed to the superior preparation and performance of every student for continuing education, rewarding employment and responsible citizenship.

Strategic Goals:

To ensure that every student is postsecondary/career ready by the completion of high school;

School environments will be safe and welcoming spaces that foster learning;

All students have the opportunity to learn from effective teachers and leaders

We're on the Web!
www.vide.vi

Denmark Delegation Opens Doors for Long-term Collaboration



Education Commissioner Donna Frett-Gregory recently led a delegation — including four teachers and four state/district administrators — from the Virgin Islands to Denmark to continue the process of developing and expanding the collaboration between Denmark and the territory.

The delegation, participated in UNESCO's annual Transatlantic Slave Trade conference — one of the key components of the Transatlantic Slave Trade ("TST") project, an initiative of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) that works with designated schools in Africa, Europe and the Caribbean to study slavery and its implications in each region. The project's objective is a cross-cultural exchange of information, teaching activities and ideas and is key in helping students understand their past and transforming their future.

"Out of this conference came connections that would link Denmark and the

Virgin Islands using education as the conduit for exposing students to a common history and culture, along with experiences that would enhance their appreciation and understanding of themselves and each other's heritage and past," Frett-Gregory said.

She explained that already, two sets of student groups from Denmark working through the project have visited St. Croix and it is expected that the territory will soon begin to send its students overseas in 2015, Frett-Gregory said.

During the conference, the V.I. delegation worked within the different education systems, and with groups of dedicated Danish educators and students on opportunities for further collaboration one of the great benefits of this meeting.

"Virgin islands teachers and administrators got an opportunity to visit a number of Danish schools and met with some of the teachers and students they would be collaborating with. The significance of these initial meetings were really critical in getting collaborative efforts going," Frett-Gregory said.

"This work will build upon earlier efforts to stimulate dialogue and collaboration among both educators and students from Denmark and the Virgin Islands," the Commissioner added. "A more structured approach to educational collaboration is the goal that will be achieved in the end. Students are the center of this whole effort and will be the beneficiar-

ies of this plan designed to provide enhanced learning opportunities for them." Interim St. Thomas-St. John Superintendent Dionne Wells recently spoke about her time as part of the delegation, saying that the trip was a "phenomenal experience" she would "never forget."

"We learned so much about our ancestors and saw many artifacts that helped us to visualize the times in which they lived," Wells said. "We were also able to forge lifelong friendships that will be used to continue a partnership between schools in the territory and Denmark; this is just the beginning of great things to come in the near future!"

Director of the Office of Virgin Islands Cultural Education, Racquel Berry-Benjamin said she is confident that the trip "is the birth of something new and amazing."

"This travel has laid the foundation for collaboration between teachers and students of both countries to work on joint projects that explore their common history," Berry-Benjamin said. "I am grateful to have been part of this delegation, as it gave me the chance to participate in some amazing intellectual discussions about our history, as well as discuss the necessary steps need to secure our relationship into the future. I believe so much more will be done moving forward."