

**Government of the United States Virgin Islands
Department of Education**

TESTIMONY

BY

**CHERMAINE HOBSON-JOHNSON
ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER**

BEFORE

THE YOUTH ADVISORY COUNCIL



**September 4th – 10:00 am
Fritz Lawaetz Legislative Hall, St. Croix**



Department of
EDUCATION

MISSION: 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.

Good morning Honorable Senator Terrence Nelson, other members of the 31th Legislature present, Chair of the Youth Advisory Council, other members of the Council present, fellow testifiers, and persons in the listening and viewing audiences. I am Chermaine Hobson-Johnson, Assistant Commissioner at the Department of Education, and am here to provide testimony on behalf of the Commissioner, Dr. Sharon Ann McCollum. Commissioner McCollum sends her regards and apologizes for her absence. Allow me to acknowledge the other leadership members in attendance today, who will assist in responding to questions you may have:

- Ms. Colleen Williams, Insular Superintendent, St. Croix District
- Dr. Wynant Watty-Benjamin, Chief of Staff
- Mrs. Yvette McMahon Arnold, Instructional Development Director
- Mrs. Alexandria-Baltimore-Hookfin, State Assessment Director

Pursuant to Senator Nelson's request dated August 11, 2015, I will provide testimony on the state of Public Education including the Common Core States Standard (CCSS) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment.

Common Core and Smarter Balanced Assessment

Many within and outside the education arena are talking about the Common Core. I trust that the information provided today will shed some light on what Common Core means for the Department (VIDE).

In 2010, the Department identified three state priorities based on stakeholder feedback on what the expectations for public education should be in the Virgin Islands. Stakeholders involved a cross section of the public and private sector, legislators, various department heads, members of the Board of Education, labor union leaders, parents, students, teachers, principals, as well as, Education state and district leadership. The three key priorities that emerged from the feedback were: (1) student achievement, (2) teacher/leader effectiveness, and (3) organizational culture.

While the three state priorities work together, the first order of business was to address student achievement. That meant establishing a set of standards territory-wide to enhance instruction in all public schools. As a member of the national collaboration on education policy through the membership in national organizations, the Virgin Islands embraced what is generally referred to as the Common Core States Standards (CCSS). These standards now referred to as the College and Career Standards, were developed and vetted by highly qualified educators across the country. The Virgin Islands' adoption of the standards levels the playing field for our students, ensures they are prepared for college and the work place, and are on par with their peers nationally and globally.

In addition, the Virgin Islands Curriculum Frameworks developed by local educators, are available for teachers to utilize in lesson planning to help them implement the standards effectively in their classrooms. The frameworks integrate and provide access to the CCSS, the Next Generation Science Standards, the National Social Studies Standards, the Virgin Islands Cultural Standards, and the International Society for Technology in Education Standards (ISTE).

Educator Effectiveness System

Having adopted the College and Career Standards, it was also necessary to work with teachers and school leaders to improve classroom instruction. Hence, the Employee Effectiveness System (EES), which includes the teacher and principal evaluation processes, is being designed as a systematic approach to improving instruction and performance throughout the Department. It was necessary to have an evaluation system that was representative of the work our educators perform, and that is aligned to the expectations of implementing the new standards. In order to obtain reliable information when assessing effectiveness, all aspects of the system must align. Though the teacher and principal evaluation processes have been completed, work on the Employee Effectiveness System continues in the development of processes for other job classifications. This is to ensure a holistic or systemic approach to support and student achievement. Evaluation processes for teachers and administrators are founded upon specific standards for teachers and administrators to guide the learning

process, and allows for targeted support and professional growth that are expected to translate into deeper, more meaningful, and focused instruction in the classroom.

School and District Accountability

Over the past two decades, accountability systems have emerged as a key strategy to improve student achievement across the nation. Standards form the basic premise of instruction and are closely tied to any accountability system. Achievement standards specify what students should know, while instructional standards set the bar for teaching. Achievement and instructional standards work together in the learning process to ensure satisfactory outcomes. These outcomes can be measured and are reflected by specific indicators when the system is evaluated, demonstrating how well we have succeeded in attaining the standards or milestones.

Due to the transition from the VITAL assessment to the Smarter Balanced, it was determined in December 2014 that student achievement scores from the 2015 Assessments would be non-consequential and Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) determinations would not be made for the 2014-2015 school year. The Accountability Workbook which delineates the AYP determination is under revision to ensure the accountability system is aligned to the new assessments in place. The accountability system includes annual targets of performance in reading and math, attendance, graduation, and a system of support for underperforming schools. The goal of this revision is to design a Next Generation Accountability System that builds

upon the strong foundation of the current system, and includes key principles that connect with other education reform efforts to ensure that all students are prepared for college and career upon graduation. The new accountability system will focus on student growth as well as proficiency status, and it will provide incentives for growth at all levels of performance. The first AYP determinations based on the new system will be made for the 2016-2017 school year.

Challenges

Sadly, the standards have been challenged in the political arena. However, an Education Week article entitled "Traction is limited in rolling back CCSS" clearly highlights the challenge states are having in repealing the standards. In defending his state's decision on the Common Core, West Virginia Superintendent of Schools, Michael J. Matirano expressed, "At the end of the day, our goal is to have the very best standards ... that assure our students are college and workforce ready." Matirano added that while there has been much talk about repealing Common Core standards, he has talked to hundreds of students, parents, and teachers across his state, and has yet to hear a specific objection about the standards. Matirano said, "Not one person across the state has given me a particular concern with a particular standard," (Phil Kabler, 2015).

As you are aware, we face a huge challenge with the number of high school graduates who are required to take remedial courses upon entrance into institutions of higher learning. We are pleased to note that over 200

universities across the USA have agreed to accept the Smarter Balanced scores to exempt students from taking remedial courses. Having this option speaks volumes to the quality of the Smarter Balanced Assessment. Using Smarter Balanced scores is a choice for students and scores are not required, but accepted at these institutions. Students can continue to take the SAT and ACT college entrance exams, if desired. The Department is collaborating with the University of the Virgin Islands to finalize the Virgin Islands Smarter Balanced Higher Education Policy.

Another challenge is educator support for the evaluation system. Many find it challenging, while others have embraced the process and view it as a way to improve, and engage in meaningful discourse with their supervisors and colleagues. This past school year, we have had to slow down the process to allow educators more time to become better familiar with the process; however, implementation of the EFS and the CCSS will continue to support improved student achievement.

Recruitment and succession planning are key challenges with an aging workforce. Separations by our seasoned workforce leave vacancies that are hard to fill and forces the Department to rely on substitutes to fill the void. The local job market for teachers and nurses does not meet the need. Therefore, we must embark on international recruitment, which is also a challenge as the salaries offered are not competitive. In addition the current status of unpaid salary increases stymies our recruitment efforts.

Maintenance of school facilities is yet another constant concern, and the St. Croix District has been harshly impacted this year by facility issues. We have had to close the Evelyn Williams Elementary and Elena Christian Jr. High School facilities for SY 2015-2016. The Charles Emmanuel Elementary School will be used to house the Elena Christian population. Staffs and students of the Evelyn Williams Elementary School and the Charles H. Emmanuel Elementary School have been reassigned to other facilities.

Personnel changes have been made within School Lunch Program to ensure improved management of the program. The program directors have been charged with ensuring measures are instituted to foster improvements. Efforts will include retraining of kitchen staffs, incorporation of local produce and recipes by local chefs to ensure meals are more palatable, and meet the nutrition guidelines stipulated by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA).

This past week, administrators returned to prepare for the reopening of schools. The leadership has met with the administrators and provided guidance on expectations for the new school year. Overall, we anticipate a smooth reopening of school next week.

Conclusion

There is much work to be done, and the challenges will continue to be addressed as we move forward. The focus will be kept on what is best to improve student achievement as we work in collaboration our teachers and

administrators to bring about significant improvements in student achievement. The Virgin Islands Department of Education (VIDE) cannot overcome its challenges alone. Hence, we seek the support the community as we work to provide the best education possible to our public school students. This ends my testimony.

Footnote:

Kabler, Phil (2015), West Virgin Gazette, "WV Superintendent defends Common Core to Legislature"
<http://www.wvgazette.com/article/20150607/GZ01/150609388#sthash.gIT8Shge.dpuf>

Ujifusa, Andrew, (April, 2015); Education Week, "Traction Limited in Rolling Back Common Core"

The Virgin Islands Frameworks are available at www.guides4learning.com

Specific learning goals of what a student should know and be able to do at the end of each grade:
www.corestandards.org