



U.S. Virgin Islands Partnership to Strengthen the Early Childhood Workforce

The U.S. Virgin Islands Partnership aims to improve kindergarten readiness and elementary learning outcomes for all PreK–Grade 3 students by strengthening the early childhood educator workforce through training in joyful learning practices. In the USVI Partnership, REL-NEI is partnering with representatives from the USVI Department of Education (VIDE) state-level offices, the two school districts in the territory (St. Croix and St. Thomas/St. John districts), the Virgin Islands Board of Education (VIBOE), the University of the Virgin Islands (UVI), and the Region 3 Comprehensive Center (R3CC).

In 2019, the USVI legislature passed Act 8270, which requires all PreK–Grade 3 teachers to obtain early childhood certification by October 1, 2024. VIDE is committed to implementing Act 8270, which requires the identification of pathways that provide alternate routes to this certification for teachers who have an elementary education licensure. Of the 890 teachers in the two school districts in 2020, 153 were early learning teachers (PreK–Grade 3), the majority of whom (135) needed to obtain early childhood certification to keep teaching at their current grade levels (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

It is important to the VIDE and the VIBOE partners that educators have multiple pathways to certification to ensure there is an option that best suits each educator’s needs and to reduce the possibility that educators will see this requirement as a barrier to staying in the teaching field. Additionally, VIDE is interested in motivating teachers in Grades 4 to 6 to seek early childhood certification, allowing school leaders more flexibility in placing teachers across grades.

Beyond the certification requirements, VIDE and VIBOE are committed to providing USVI educators with robust professional learning opportunities that foster evidence-based best practices in the classroom, with a particular focus on playful learning. Research provides such extensive support for the importance of play for healthy development that the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends play be integrated into the school setting (Ginsburg et al., 2007) and Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) recognized engaging in play as a fundamental right of every child.

The USVI Partnership thus will support VIDE and other local partners in helping the PreK–Grade 3 teaching workforce become certified in early childhood education and in providing resources for professional learning around playful learning as new cohorts of educators enter the workforce.

PAST, CURRENT & UPCOMING PROJECTS

Training, Coaching, And Technical Support

Micro-credential Modules

The partnership designed three evidence-based micro-credential modules that will allow USVI early childhood and elementary teachers to earn micro-credentials toward certification in early childhood to be eligible to teach in PreK–Grade 3 under the new law. Each micro-credential module includes six to seven lessons and is

approximately 10 hours long. These modules are online, asynchronous learning experiences for educators to engage with at their own pace. The asynchronous and self-paced aspect of the micro credentials meets an important need of REL-NEI's USVI partners, as they want to avoid over-burdening educators during a time of high educator burn-out and turnover. They recognize the challenge in asking teachers to get additional certification for work they are already doing, and USVI teachers are also overburdened given the continued impact of the COVID pandemic.

REL-NEI completed delivery of these three modules in August 2023. The modules, focused on playful learning and aligned with National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) standards, provide teachers with 10 hours of professional development and one IACET-awarded continuing education unit per module. The modules underwent a robust review process, receiving iterative feedback from content experts, internal partners, and USVI educators to ensure that the modules are responsive to the local context and meet the needs of USVI early childhood educators. The modules are currently available to VIDE educators on the VIDE professional learning suite. Given the interest expressed by educators outside the VIDE system (e.g., librarians, paraprofessionals, UVI, Head Start) in accessing the modules, REL-NEI will work with VIDE to make the modules available to a wider audience, either on their microsite (goopenusvi.vide.vi) or by other means.

Administrator Supports

Despite strong support from partnership members, early childhood experts, and local teachers and administrators for the content and format of the modules, uptake and usage has been slow. In conversations during USVI site visits in Fall 2022, teachers expressed concern that their administrators might not support implementation of the recommended playful learning practices in their classrooms, because playful learning can appear noisy, chaotic, and unproductive. Follow-up conversations with administrators during site visits in Fall 2023 revealed similar concerns: that state and district leaders might need support in understanding the value of, and need for, playful learning. In addition, administrators also expressed a desire for guidance on creating group learning opportunities for teachers to complete the modules together, including more hands-on training in collaboration methods such as gallery walks and fishbowl discussions.

To address the expressed needs of both teachers and administrators, during Year 3, REL-NEI will improve implementation and encourage sustained use of the modules in two ways:

1. by providing educators with materials on joyful learning that they can share with other stakeholders to improve their understanding of the benefits of joyful learning. REL-NEI will work with local partners to create a short video, using existing presentation content voiced over a video of a joyful classroom in the USVI.
2. by training administrators to create group learning opportunities in which their teachers can complete the modules. This will include development of a short, locally appropriate facilitators' guide (Collaborative Learning of Joyful Learning Strategies) to creating and sustaining learning teams, which will be iteratively tested in USVI schools.

Dissemination

Bringing Joyful Learning to Early Childhood Classrooms

Encouraging singing, laughter, and play in early childhood classrooms is a key priority for USVI. This blog explores the value of joyful learning, what playful classrooms look like, and strategies to help educators bring joy to the classroom so children can learn and thrive.

PARTNERSHIP LEADS



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