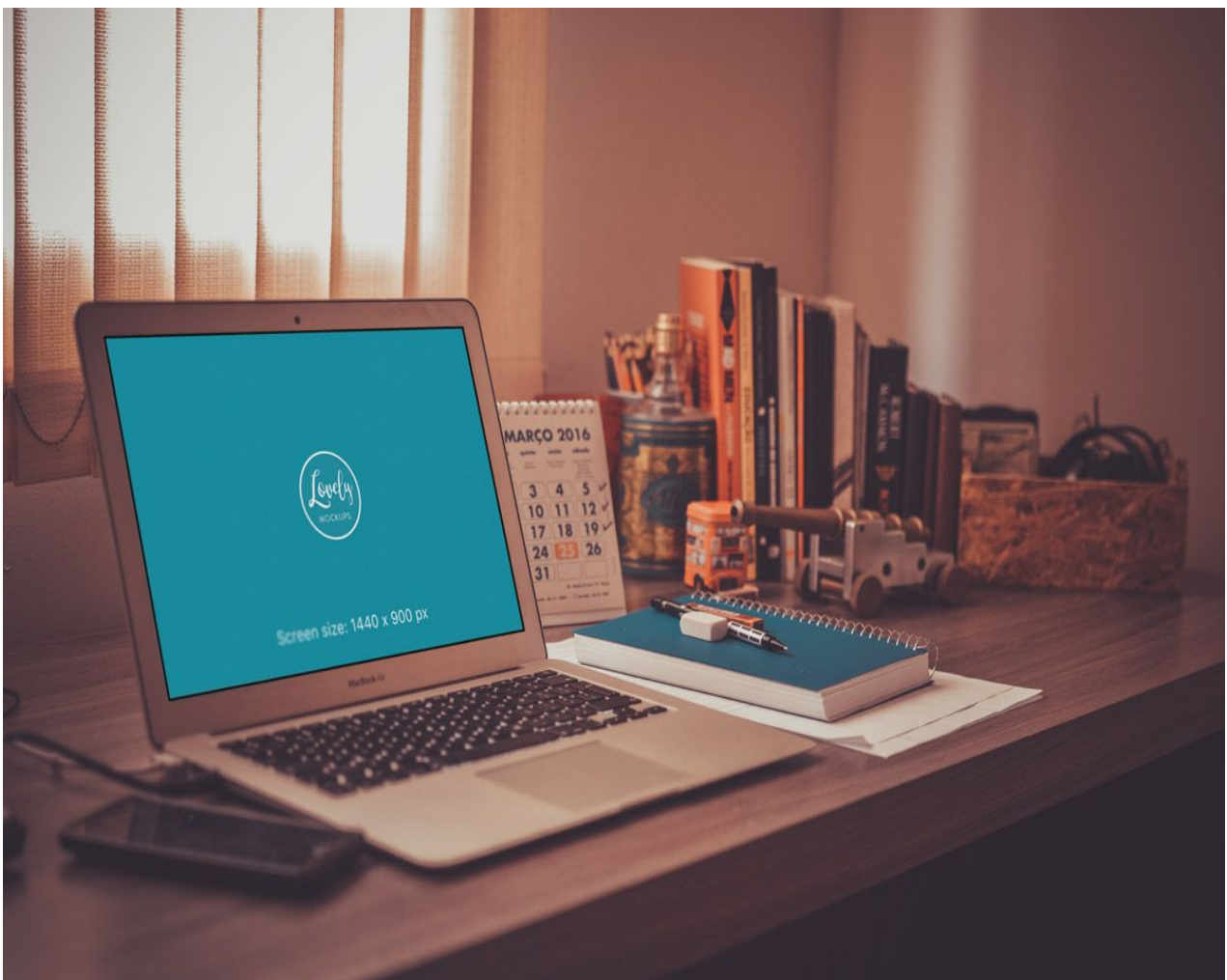


The Virgin Islands Consortium

Dept. of Education Opposes Revert to Virtual Learning, Pointing to Decline in Proficiency Scores and Over 1,000 Missing or Damaged Devices

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Virtual learning's effectiveness on St. Croix is under scrutiny, according to Superintendent of Education Dr. Ericilda Ottley-Herman, who highlighted alarming statistics during a recent broadcast by the Department of Education.

The figures revealed a sharp decline in proficiency scores, with only 5.6 percent of students showing proficiency in mathematics and 17.4 percent in English language arts post-pandemic. Additionally, hundreds of digital devices issued for virtual learning remain unreturned or damaged, adding to concerns about the feasibility of online education in

the district.

Ottley-Herman was responding to questions relating to the department's seeming hesitation to revert to the virtual learning modality used during the heights of the pandemic despite [abysmal](#) conditions in schools across St. Croix.

"Post-pandemic, 5.6 percent of our students in the St. Croix district scored proficient in the Smarter Balanced in mathematics; 17.4 percent scored proficient in English language arts," revealed the superintendent. These figures are lower than when the Consortium reported on the issue [last year](#), and Ottley-Herman noted that prior to the pandemic, scores were 10 percent proficiency for mathematics and 28 percent proficiency for English language arts.

Now, education officials are examining the role virtual learning played in "learning loss". The challenges created by virtual learning itself were compounded by challenges managing student behavior. Some students would not log on, while others would be online but not pay attention, said Ottley-Herman. Technology, she assured, will remain an option, especially as the Department of Education works to better the infrastructure in the territory's schools. However, as Ottley-Herman maintained, "We know that face-to-face works. So that was one of the reasons behind adjusting the schedule – to allow our students to have in-person instruction, because we saw the impact in terms of proficiency and we have schools who over the years have consistently scored low."

The superintendent said that students at these chronically low-scoring schools will benefit from an expanded online coaching program, which yielded positive results during a pilot. However, Education Commissioner Dr. Dionne Wells-Hedrington noted that these initiatives must be principal-led. Since chronic teacher shortages means that many qualified coaches are already employed within the education sector, she envisaged schools using their allocated funds to recruit retired teachers or other suitable people on a per diem basis. "While the district is there to support, and the state as well, that shift that we need to see has to happen from the classroom out," the education commissioner declared during a Thursday event it organized [to address frustration over learning conditions](#) at St. Croix educational facilities.

As the Department of Education continues to find ways to return proficiency test scores to pre-pandemic levels, it was also revealed during Thursday's broadcast that many of the devices used to facilitate virtual learning during that time have disappeared. According to Wells-Hedrington, "you got 600 devices that are lost and missing at [St. Croix Educational] Complex. You have another 500 at Central [High School]. People either didn't bring them back, or they brought them back damaged." The Department of Education must also foot a \$700,000 Viya bill for MiFi devices that were not returned, she said.

The commissioner announced that while new devices have been received through emergency grant support, some students who received up to five replacement devices during the pandemic "can't be rewarded to have a device that they own, because you never brought back the Department of Education's assets." The department, she said, is currently having conversations to determine how to ensure all students have access to technology and promote responsibility among both parents and students.

Finding ways to boost academic proficiency is part of the D.O.E.'s "Give Us 10" district-wide campaign, seeking a 10 percent increase in academics and attendance each, and a 10 percent reduction in incidents. Ottley-Herman, the St. Croix superintendent, notes that initiatives to help reach those goals would be tailored to meet the differing needs of individual schools on St. Croix.

Despite student and educator complaints about difficulties experienced in teaching and learning in hot, mildewy classrooms, education officials are seemingly arguing that the alternative – not being able to learn at all – is much worse.

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