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Education Commissioner Discusses AI, Math Proficiency, and Potential 4-Day School Week on Podcast

Exploring innovative solutions and addressing challenges, the commissioner outlines future strategies for educational enhancement in the territory

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V.I. Dept. of Education Commissioner Dr. Dionne Wells-Hedrington. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE

Last week, Education Commissioner Dionne Wells-Hedrington, joined Jeffery Hernandez, CEO of National Academic Education Partners, on his podcast to discuss her vision for future-proofing education in the territory. As technology and career opportunities rapidly change, Wells-

Hedrington emphasized the need to prepare students for an unknown future.

"It's all about the students. Everything that I do, I always keep the students at the center," she said. "I really want to make sure that public education becomes a viable option where we're actually preparing our students for life."

Wells-Hedrington has over 30 years of experience in education, having worked as a teacher, principal, and administrator. She credits her diverse background with allowing her to understand challenges at every level of the system. As commissioner, Wells-Hedrington said she aims to support teachers and ensure students have what they need to succeed.

One key focus is improving literacy and math skills, which have been impacted by multiple hurricanes and the Covid-19 pandemic, according to the commissioner, who cited a 2023 report on academic achievement that found disturbingly [low scores in math proficiency](#) in these areas among the territory's 7th graders.

However, the education commissioner said that the issues faced by children in the territory are more fundamental. "Our focus needs to be on the early childhood level. Even if you go back before the pandemic hit, you will see some gaps that were identifiable in those early childhood years," she said.

The V.I. Department of Education is now partnering with organizations to train teachers in the "science of reading" and provide intervention support. Wells-Hedrington also emphasized using data to drive instruction and align budgets with strategic goals. "Data matters in public education," she stated. "That's how we are going to see the growth that we need to see."

When asked about student and parent engagement, Wells-Hedrington acknowledged more work is needed. The territory struggles with consistent parental involvement, especially post-Covid. As a former principal, she shared strategies like parent seminars and English classes to improve engagement.

The department is also aware of what changes students believe may enhance their learning experiences. For example, the commissioner cited a request for more active, technology-integrated lessons rather than passive lectures. She plans to provide additional teacher training to meet evolving student needs.

Recruiting and retaining qualified teachers [remains a challenge](#) in the territory as well as across the nation. Wells-Hedrington noted that her department has addressed the issue in a number of ways – "right-sizing" human resources to adjust for the overall drop in population over the past few years, and utilizing virtual teachers to fill gaps, among other interventions.

Unlike elsewhere in the country, a move to a four-day schedule is not currently under consideration. "That's something that we can definitely explore," she mused. "We definitely need to look at our scheduling." Beyond that, Wells-Hedrington entertained the idea of harnessing artificial intelligence as another potential solution.

Overall, the commissioner said he aim is to ensure "our students are truly prepared for life" by focusing on academics as well as social-emotional development. This includes supporting students' mental health and families' well-being through partnerships with other agencies.

As the territory rebuilds its hurricane-damaged school infrastructure, Wells-Hedrington sees an opportunity to provide more student choice and customized learning environments.

