

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Letter To The Editor: Teacher Shortages Plague V.I. Dept. of Education

Opinion / **Published On October 29, 2014 01:42 PM /**

Staff **October 29, 2014**



Dear Editor,

As we move toward the end of the first semester, the Virgin Islands Department of Education continues to be plagued with teacher shortages--a phenomenon that is not unique to us, but rather something that is being experienced across the Caribbean and nationally.

There are a number of areas that contribute to this issue, including difficulties in recruiting off-island candidates. And as many in our ranks retire, we have also noticed that our up-and-coming college graduates majoring in Education are looking at careers in elementary

education, instead of the harder-to-staff areas such as Math, Science, Languages and Special Education.

Over the years, we have also set the bar higher by demanding that our permanent teachers become certified and highly qualified. To accomplish this, we have partnered with the V.I. Board of Education in finding creative ways of getting new educators into the classrooms.

We have also been challenged by the large amount of retirements and resignations that we receive each year – and how late in the year they're submitted. In order to ensure that we have enough educators in our classrooms, we routinely ask for employees to declare by April 15th of the current school year their intent to retire or resign. Despite this practice, employees still submit their separation notices at the last minute.

According to the numbers, 29 employees territory-wide made clear their intention to leave just weeks before the start of the 2014-2015 school year and an extra 10 employees sent in notice they would be leaving, effective at the end of September 2014. We also have a large number of individuals that could potentially retire at the end of this year because they have fulfilled the 30 years of service requirement.

What do we do in those cases? Well, we generally use our substitute pool, and while we have been consistently able to draw from this source, it is not the same as being able to give our students the same highly qualified, permanent teacher that can be there for them on a continuous basis. We have been fortunate, however, to have a number of retired educators in our substitute pool and they have truly helped to support instruction. In the St. Thomas-St. John District, 32 retirees are currently on board, along with 22 more in the St. Croix District.

However, we remain concerned with the teacher shortages--most especially, with the need to fill our classrooms with permanent teachers as we continue the implementation of the Common Core State Standards. This initiative is meant to effectuate new levels of student achievement, and ideally, having permanent teachers--equipped with the necessary teaching strategies--will help transition our existing classrooms into this new educational direction.

So, year round, we continue to recruit teachers aggressively in an effort to plug the teaching holes in the classrooms. By no means is this easy, but I assure parents, students, and staff, that we are committed to the process.

We recently received the approval needed from the U.S. State Department--the federal agency with oversight of international affairs--that would allow us to continue hiring international teachers to fill the vacancies we are unable to fill with local and mainland recruits.

While that's underway, we have also communicated and shared all our territorial teaching opportunities with the career placement office at the City University of New York (CUNY,) State University of New York (SUNY,) Purdue University (specifically for qualified individuals in the areas of science, technology, engineering, and math) and the Universidad Inter-Americana de Puerto Rico (specifically for qualified individuals in English and English as a Second Language,) along with other national institutions.

And with all these efforts, we're gaining ground, but we also want to be honest about what we're experiencing and what we need in order to get over this. We also need our community to understand that this situation is not new, nor is it unique to the Virgin Islands, but it is something we're aggressive about resolving and with your continued support, we can work together right now, to work within our resources and empower all our students for success.

Thank you and best wishes for a productive school year.

Donna Frett-Gregory

Commissioner of Education

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