

# The Virgin Islands Consortium

## Territory's First Farm-To-School Program Deemed A Success

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ST. CROIX – The territory's first farm-to-school conference hosted by the Virgin Islands Department of Education's Special Nutrition Programs May 28 at UVI's Albert A. Sheen campus Great Hall brought together stakeholders in education, agriculture, government, and the general public for formal discussions on advancing the joint goals of having locally sourced foods served in school cafeterias, the incorporation of farming in classroom curriculum and the establishment of gardens at each of the territory's public schools.

Department of Education Assistant Commissioner Chermaine Hobson-Johnson praised the collaborative effort.

“This is the marriage that we want – agriculture and education,” she said during her remarks. “Education Commissioner Dr. Sharon McCollum and I share the same vision—children first. I operate on this simple pathway that if you can’t feed our children correctly, they’re not going to learn as well as they should. I’m so proud that we’re doing this today because this is the beginning of where we need to go.”

Farm-to-school programs first came on the scene in the U.S. mainland in 2010. A push to heighten awareness in the territory began a year ago when Sommer Sibilly-Brown, a former Ricardo Richards Elementary teacher and current Executive Director of the Virgin Islands Good Food Coalition, became inspired by her young students.

“This wasn’t my plan; it was 18 of my students in Ricardo Richards’ multi-age classroom. They were really passionate about being change agents and this gave us the opportunity to see what change we could make,” she said.

Sibilly-Brown spearheaded the first-time gathering themed, “Linking the V.I. Chain” by assisting the Department of Education with securing a \$21,698 conference grant in September 2014 through the USDA’s Child Nutrition Program.

V.I. Department of Agriculture Commissioner Designee Carlos Robles also expressed his support of a territory-wide farm-to-school program.

“It is my own personal desire as a professional, agriculturalist and Virgin Islander to see more homegrown food in our school systems, and this would be before I accepted the appointment of Commissioner of Agriculture,” he said while addressing conference-goers. “It is part of my vision, as well, to ultimately see that every school has a school garden. On behalf of our Governor and Lt. Governor, who bought into this before they were elected, I want to say we support it.”

Keynote speaker Lyn Kathlene, Ph.D, director of the Spark Policy Institute based in Denver, Colo., presented, “Partnership to Progress: The Road Map to Farm to School.” Her talk guided attendees through a pre-road mapping session on implementing farm-to-school. With the information gathered, Sibilly-Brown said a smaller group will travel to St. Thomas on June 1 to begin crafting a five-year road map for the territory.

“In five years, our goal is if ten percent of our schools have documented school-based gardens and five-percent of the food we’re purchasing in the school lunch program is sourced locally, I think we would have made a huge impact,” she concluded.

*Feature Image: Conference organizer Sommer Sibilly-Brown addresses audience members at “Linking the V.I. Chain” farm-to-school conference at UVI’s Great Hall on May 28.*

*Image Credit: Virgin Islands Department of Education.*