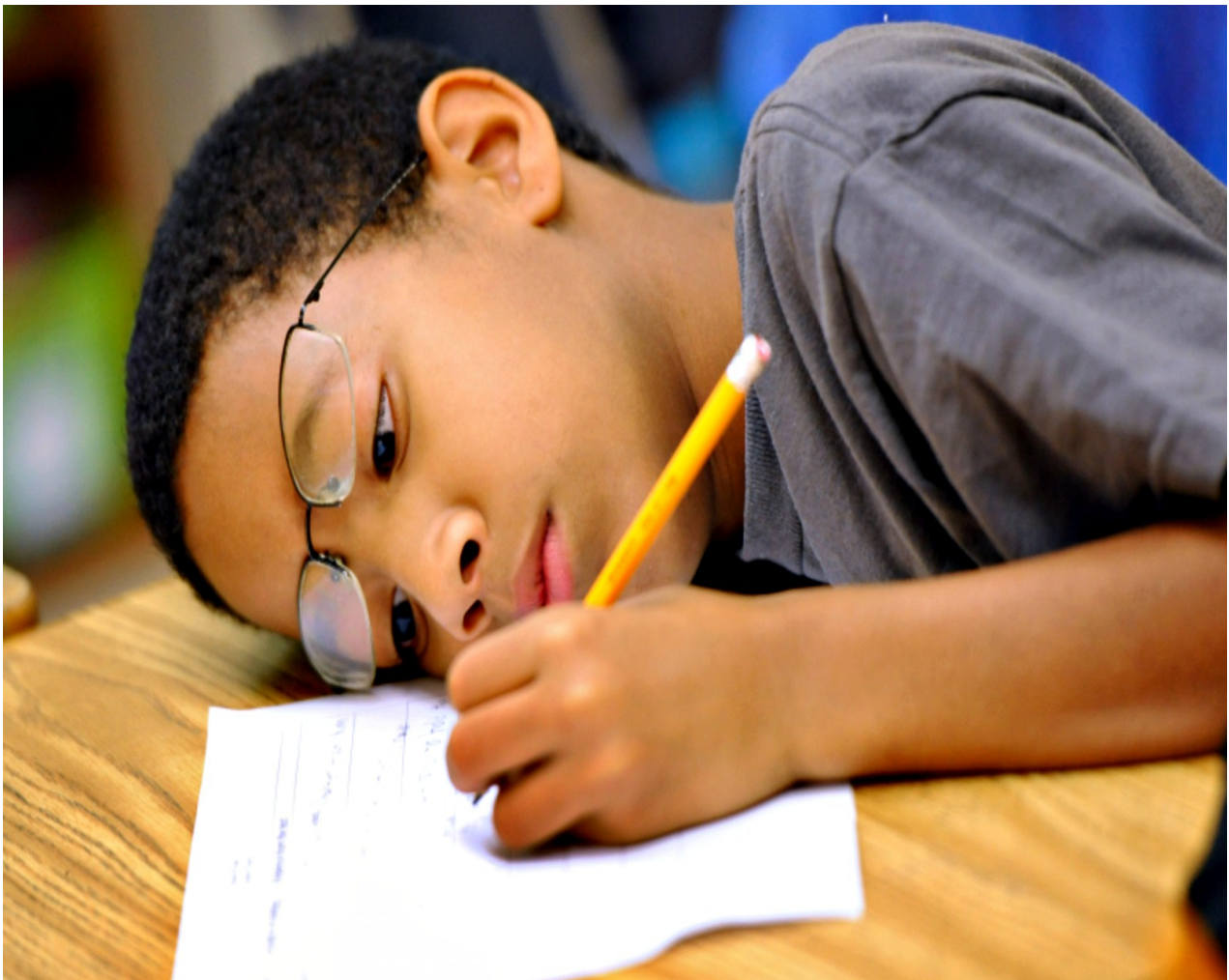


# The Virgin Islands Consortium

## VI Students Perform Poorly In New Academic Tests; Department Of Education Withholds Information From Media Outlet

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Ernice Gilbert **December 23, 2015**



ST. CROIX -- Multiple local media reports today, with information provided to them by the Virgin Islands Department of Education via a press release and telephone conference with Education officials, revealed poor tests results from most of the 8,859 public school students in the territory, who took part in the Smarter Balanced Assessments. But The Consortium's readership, with 2.7 million pageviews monthly, a dedicated 7,000-10,000 people who visit the site directly daily, and over 50,000 more through social platforms and Google search -- all on a daily basis -- was willfully blocked out of receiving the information by DOE.

The publication became concerned that it had missed a press conference when it saw the tests information widely circulated in local media -- VI Daily News, The St. Croix Avis and VI Source -- complete with interviews with DOE officials. When the publication contacted Education Public Relations Officer Cynthia Graham, she said that DOE was "rolling out" the press release. But Ms. Graham's response does not add up.

The Department of Education had never delayed issuing a press release to The Consortium before yesterday, and it subsequently barred the outlet from the teleconference it held with other media houses. In fact, at times, Ms. Graham incessantly contacts this platform when a DOE press release has been issued but was not yet published on the site. Furthermore, just two days ago, Ms. Graham requested that The Consortium run an editorial about the selfsame tests in an attempt to build a case for why the new system should be given a chance. The publication not only ran the story [on its website](#), but also published the editorial on its [popular Facebook platform](#). Yet, The Consortium was blocked from a conference call that Education held to explain why the 2014-15 grades were so low.

Was the decision made with mal-intent so as to hide poor results from being published on a platform that would all but guarantee the territory as a whole learn about it? Ms. Graham said she took it upon herself to withhold the information from The Consortium; and that her bosses had nothing to do with it.

Ms. Graham had to go through her saved email blast contacts and willfully remove this publication from receiving the press release. And her decision on that matter, as well as not making available information to The Consortium about the conference call, barred thousands of Virgin Islanders from receiving pertinent information in a timely fashion about the territory's education system.

After The Consortium pressed Ms. Graham on the matter, the press release was hurriedly sent to the publication. Ms. Graham also said that Commissioner of Education Sharon McCollum would be available for an interview.

## **Test Results**

Ms. McCollum said the tests are here to stay; but the results released yesterday demonstrate how much work the department has ahead to help students succeed with the new system, which was designed to gauge student performance in specific areas.

Throughout the territory, only 17 percent of students from all grades met or exceeded the English and Language Arts standard in DOE's new system; while only 7 percent excelled in math.

"These results usher in a new era for Virgin Islands public education and is a first glance into where Virgin Islands' students are with meeting more rigorous academic standards that focus on critical thinking, problem solving and analytical writing," Commissioner McCollum said. "The Virgin Islands' new standards and tests raise the bar for both teachers and students. As we expected, students need to make more progress. We are committed to supporting students, teachers and schools to ensure their success."

The new tests are supposed to align with the Common Core and Career Readiness Standards; but the program came under fire from President Barack Obama, who recently

signed into law a bill that [bars the government from imposing academic requirements like the Common Core](#). And Senator Kurt Vialet has said that the Common Core system lacks the Virgin Islands Standard, which he contends needs to be incorporated into Common Core for a more holistic education approach -- especially in the areas of social studies, which would include the history and culture of the territory.

"A number of states have taken a look at Common Core, and they have merged it with their state standard," Mr. Vialet [told The Consortium recently](#), naming Florida as an example, which renamed the curriculum the Florida Common Core State Standard.

The results, seen at the bottom of this article, shows that 59 percent of students territory-wide fell below the English Language standard in Common Core, while only 24 percent scored near it. The math numbers were even more dismal; with only 19 percent of students scoring near the standard, while 74 percent scored below.

"This is the first time that performance tasks were administered as part of the territory's end of year assessment. In English, students now have to apply their research and writing skills, and in math, they solve complex problems and then describe and defend their reasoning. As teachers spend more time focusing on the content outlined in the new standards and students gain more practice with the skills, the scores are expected to improve," State Assessment Director Alexandria Baltimore-Hookfin stated. "It is better to have our students challenged now—with teachers there to help—so they can be fully prepared when they enroll in college or seek to enter the workforce."

DOE adopted Common Core in 2010, but only began implementation during the 2013-14 school year. Aside from the near 9,000 students who participated, 78 students were enrolled in the National Center and State Collaborative Online Alternate Assessment.

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