

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Freedom School, Being Piloted In Territory, Offers Different Way Of Learning

Education / **Published On July 12, 2016 04:02 PM /**

Ernice Gilbert **July 12, 2016**



ST. CROIX -- Tucked away in a classroom at the Claude O. Markoe Elementary School, about 25 children were having a blast. They sang, played games, and performed other fun activities led by teachers, who themselves were ostensibly enjoying every moment.

But it's the summertime, when most children are either at home with family, working summer jobs or are away on vacation. Furthermore, the students wore regular clothing, and the whole atmosphere, though conducive to learning, seemed rather unconventional.

"Freedom School, how you feeling?!" asked Teacher Crystal Peter, her voice ricocheting through the small classroom. The students responded with as much vigor, along with

body movement.

[View the original embedded media](#)

So what's really going on at Claude O. Markoe on weekdays from 8:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. with Kindergarten to third grade students? We asked Site Coordinator Dorine Cuffy to explain.

"Freedom School is a Lieutenant Governor's Office initiative introduced as a pilot program in the Virgin Islands, in St. Croix and St. Thomas," Mrs. Cuffy said. On St. Croix, the program is also active at the Juanita Gardine Elementary School. It is based around growing children's love for reading, whereby they would be motivated to pick up books and read without outside motivation.

The program seeks to build strong, literate, and empowered children prepared to make a difference in themselves, their families, communities, nation and world, by providing reading enrichment for children who might otherwise not have access to books.

Ms. Cuffy said that from 8:00 a.m. to about 9:00 a.m., teachers engage students in motivational sessions, including songs and games -- all in an effort to foster a positive attitude that would last all day, she said, as children are usually melancholic about being in school during the summertime.

On Monday, Stephanie Bullock, a sophomore at the University of the Virgin Islands studying biology and aerospace science, and one of a handful of students who had the opportunity [to meet President Barack Obama last year](#), spoke to students about her dream of becoming an astronaut, and encouraged them to follow their own path. She also read them a story.

The program is popular around the U.S., and although it's being piloted as a summer program in the territory, it has been integrated as a yearround program in many mainland schools.

[View the original embedded media](#)

The program is sponsored by the Community Foundation of the Virgin Islands and the Lieutenant Governor's Office. The Department of Labor is also supporting the effort by providing Student Leader Interns (college students), who are paid in part by D.O.L. and C.F.V.I.

Unfortunately, each class can only consist of 25 students, and Mrs. Cuffy said that both locations here are already at capacity. However, if the pilot program is successful -- and it's looking to be a hit -- Freedom School will be expanded into more classrooms and possibly beyond summer.