

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Over 70 Percent Of VI Students Perform Below Standard In Math; More Than Half In English

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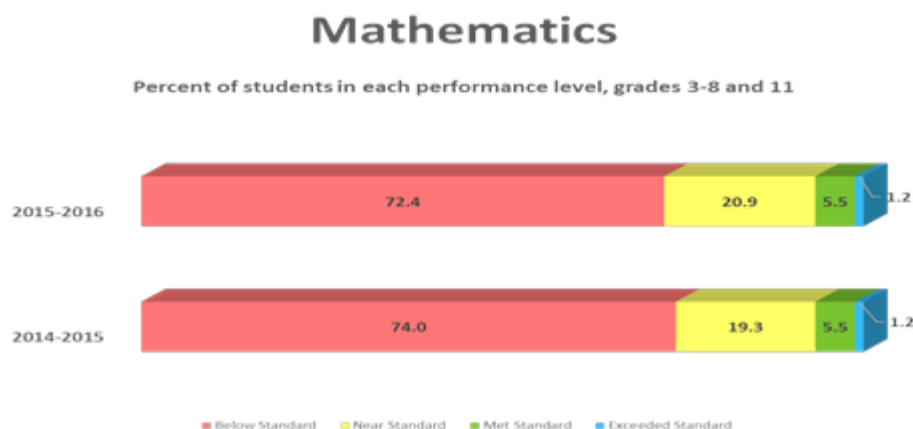
Ernice Gilbert **December 22, 2016**



The Virgin Islands Department of Education on Tuesday released its annual testing using the new Smarter Balanced assessments, with the latest being the department's second year conducting the test. Though D.O.E. noted improvements year-over-year in both mathematics and English Language tests, those increases were small -- 1.6 percent in mathematics, and 3.4 percent in English -- according to charts the department provided.

The U.S. Virgin Islands, which uses Common Core standards, is part of 15 states that support the Smarter Balanced assessment, according to the [Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium](#), the public agency's official site.

A majority of Virgin Islands students still perform poorly in mathematics, with 72.4 percent of students performing below standard in the 2015-16 school year. In English Language, 56 percent of students performed below standard in the 2015-16 school year, according to the charts. The tests were conducted with students in grades 3-8 and grade 11.



D.O.E. says the small improvement in literacy occurred at the elementary (grades 3-6), junior high (grades 7-8), and high school (grade 11) levels. The percentage point increase in English Language was most pronounced in 8th grade (4 percentage points) as students prepare to transition to high school, and in 11th grade (3 percentage points) as they prepare to pursue higher education and enter the workforce, according to D.O.E.

Asked whether D.O.E. could give an estimated timeline on when officials expected to see half of all the territory's students performing at standard in English Language and mathematics, D.O.E. said it rather not predict when said percentage would be achieved.

"We are going to work towards looking at the growth of our students year after year," Assistant D.O.E. Commissioner Charmaine Hobson said during a teleconference with reporters midday Wednesday. "At the end of each year we anticipate to see more gains because of all the initiatives that we're putting in place." She spoke highly about the performance of superintendents and coordinators, stating that "they're living in the schools," an expression that speaks to their presence on campuses. Ms. Williams also said that school principals were conducting more walkthroughs, and that the employee effectiveness system used by D.O.E. was being utilized more often.

"So we are seeing changes, we know that we want to see our students do well. We are doing the right thing for all our students. I do anticipate that we will see an increase again this year because of all of our efforts, but to honestly say that we want to project that we can get to 50 percent in two years, three years, four years -- that's almost a bit ambitious. But I know that we are working as if we want to see 100 percent next year and the following year."

English Language Arts/Literacy

Percent of students in each performance level, grades 3-8 and 11



She added: "I don't want to tell you that we're shortchanging our students because we're not projecting to that 50 percent. In fact we're giving our students 100 percent of every initiative possible, and professional development to all our educators to ensure that our students make gains annually."

Asked if D.O.E. officials were satisfied with the incremental increase in literacy and mathematics, Ms. Williams said while they applaud students who have moved from below standard to standard, true satisfaction would only come when all students perform at standard.

"The scores are basically telling us that our students made gains. To be honest with you, we'll never be satisfied until we can get all our students to where we need them to be. But we do recognize that gains were met and achieved, and we're looking towards more gains again this year and the year after," Ms. Hobson said. "So it's a difficult question to respond to because yes, we want to recognize those students who made gains and made great improvements -- even from the low standards to the next category... But ultimately, like I stated earlier, we will never be satisfied until all our students are where we want them to be."

D.O.E., encouraged by the numbers, said it would not relent in implementing initiatives that lead to improvements. The department said it has convened a territory-wide task force to take a more in-depth look at how student and school success are defined. The redesigned accountability system, according to D.O.E., will be implemented in the 2017-18 school year and will include measures of achievement, growth, English language proficiency, graduation rate, and school quality. And with the department's Strategic Management Plan underway, which aims to provide a keen focus on student achievement, D.O.E. predicts a "turnaround in the operation of the Virgin Islands public education system."

As the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) that was signed into law by President Obama in December 2015 -- which is a sweeping rewrite of former President George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind Act -- begins to take hold, D.O.E. says it's in the process of revising its accountability system to ensure that the department meets all requirements set forth by the law.

The new law, which saw bipartisan support in Congress, will maintain the mandatory standardized testing in reading and math established by the Bush-era law, but leave it up to state and local officials to set their own performance goals, rate schools and determine how to fix those that fail to meet their objectives.

It also bars the federal government from imposing academic requirements like the Common Core.

Correction: December 22, 2016

A previous version of this article, because of a text error, included Colleen Williams as the assistant commissioner of the Department of Education. Charmaine Hobson is the assistant commissioner and Ms. Williams is the St. Croix Superintendent of Schools. We've updated the story to reflect the correct information.

Feature Image: Students at the St. Croix Education Complex attend the first day of the 2015-16 school year. (Credit: Ernice Gilbert, VIC)