

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Opinion | Teaching In The VI: An Analysis Of The World's Most Underappreciated Career

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Education is the cornerstone of every prosperous society. Through education, we mold the minds of the business leaders, entrepreneurs, doctors, artists, engineers, and, yes, teachers of tomorrow. It's no secret that teachers in American society are heavily undervalued. Although they can be credited for the knowledge many adults take for granted. This phenomenon is amplified in the U.S. Virgin Islands. Let's flashback to 2011 when salaries of teachers were cut by 8% to save the Virgin Islands government money.

Educators are so underappreciated, that they're sometimes paid for half the time they actually work. In addition to all the time they put forth trying to make sure students learn the necessary material, they also spend their "off-hours" grading assignments, planning

lessons, decorating classrooms, among other responsibilities. Just how much does a teacher in the Virgin Islands make annually? According to career matching platform Sokanu, an elementary school teacher in the Virgin Islands earns a median of \$40,560. By comparison, an elementary school teacher on the mainland earns about \$54,000. With this kind of compensation disparity, why are we so surprised that there are 151 vacancies available in the Virgin Islands Department of Education? It can be tricky comparing wages and salaries to the mainland. Especially since the Virgin Islands doesn't function like a state. However, if we consider the cost of living in the Virgin Islands, it would appear that raises are not only past due, but are necessary for the betterment of our youth.

With this kind of compensation disparity, it is easy to see why we are at risk of having almost 300 additional vacancies in our Department of Education at any moment if some faculty and staff decided to retire. Many teachers chose this career path because they genuinely love what they do and want to make a difference. In order to battle the cost of living and many other challenges that come with living in the Virgin Islands, teachers must be adequately compensated for their hard work. Moving into the administrative side of education shouldn't have to be the primary option for earning a decent livable wage, especially when a teacher sincerely loves what they are doing.

I wish that this were the only issue, but there's a larger issue at play. Our teachers often begin fighting an uphill battle once they get settled into their careers. Having the necessary equipment, up-to-date technology, and proper materials keep classrooms functioning at maximum capacity. Many classrooms in the territory lack the necessary tools to give our children the best experience or even a quality education. Would you ask a carpenter to build you a quality table and not provide him quality tools, materials, and plans? Now, replace the table with a well educated student, replace the carpenter with a teacher, and replace those tools, materials, and plans with textbooks, infrastructure, and the current education system.

We cannot expect our educators to develop our youth or even raise the standards when they are using textbooks that are older than the students themselves. The conditions many teachers are forced to work in, especially those working in a public school setting is unnerving. It is absurd to expect teachers and students to function if they're in an environment with subpar standards. The dated education system in the Virgin Islands seems to be working against the youth, constantly setting them up for failure. It is the job of policy makers to ensure that graduates are prepared for life after high school in the VI or anywhere in the world they decide to travel to. We must take time to ensure our youngest students are truly engaged and competent adults when they begin pursuing higher education or vocational training.

I now turn my attention to the parents in the Virgin Islands. Teachers will need your help to mold and educate your sons and daughters to lead them to success. Completing assignments and projects for your child only sets them up to fail. Being actively engaged in their academic progress is perhaps, one of the most important aspects of parenting. This means coming in from time to time to check on the academic and social progress of your child. Helping your child understand the assigned homework, investing in tutors, attending PTA meetings, and making sure they're keeping up with their studies are some of the ways parents can make a meaningful impact in their children's lives.

It is also important to encourage our youth to take part in the Science Fair, the Spelling Bee, the STEM Fair, or other programs like Kids Count. We sometimes get upset with results or progress related to our children's academics, but we often forget that teachers care about their students' success, too.

Teachers regularly put themselves under enormously large levels of stress to ensure that their students are progressing and achieving. It is time for the community to recognize their selfless sacrifice and begin giving them the support they need.

Together, we must begin to make efforts to support our educators. This includes pressuring policymakers, the head of state, and other stakeholders to pay them a salary that moves beyond reasonable and reflects the merits of their hard work and dedication. The next decade, and the future of the Virgin Islands is directly related to how we prepare our youth for a world that continues to change. The Virgin Islands houses some of the brightest minds in the region, as a community, we can hone and leverage all of those talents if we simply work together.

Submitted on Sunday by Charles Brown, founder and executive director of Project reVive.