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Territorial Cradle Literacy Project Launched by the V.I. Departments of Education and Health

Education / **Published On December 02, 2021 06:58 AM /**

Staff Consortium **December 02, 2021**

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Education Commissioner Racquel Berry-Benjamin and Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion, along with other education and health officials, launched the Territory's Cradle Literacy Project By. THE VIRGIN ISLANDS DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

The V.I. Department of Education announced Wednesday that it has partnered with the V.I. Dept. of Health to launch the territory's Cradle Literacy Project, an initiative funded through a \$154,412 grant from the U.S. Department of Education "to create a comprehensive literacy program to advance pre-literacy skills, reading, and writing for students from birth through grade 12, including limited-English-proficient students and students with disabilities."

According to the release, during a launch ceremony held Nov. 30 at D.O.H.'s Maternal Child Health (MCH) division on St. Thomas and attended by Education Commissioner Racquel Berry-Benjamin, Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion, and other education and health officials, it was announced that the two agencies signed a memorandum of understanding on March 16 that allowed the program to move forward.

The Cradle Literacy Project is aligned to the U.S. D.O.E.'s Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy Grant and will provide baskets of books to families with young children from birth to age three. Thirteen books, some of which are available in both English and Spanish, have been curated for the initiative.

“The idea was to deliver baskets of books, with the support of MCH, to the hospitals when babies are born so that parents can start developing those early literacy skills in their children,” explained Yvette McMahon-Arnold, D.O.E. state director of instructional development. “We are hoping that as a result of this launch today, we get a number of parents on board so that we may support them and our youngest learners.”

During her remarks, Ms. Berry-Benjamin highlighted Governor Albert Bryan’s Cradle to Career Pipeline that calls for educating children at the earliest stages of life through young adulthood.

“To contribute to the Governor’s vision, you have witnessed the establishment of a number of prekindergarten programs at the Department of Education,” Ms. Berry-Benjamin said, according to the Dept. of Education. “Since 2018, the Department has launched eight PreK classrooms within our two districts, with six of those opening during the pandemic.”

Ms. Berry-Benjamin further implored parents to read to their unborn children.

“There is countless research to support the effectiveness of reading to children from birth,” she said. “Help us to build strong early literacy foundations by reading to your child while they are in the womb. I look forward to your support on breaking old cycles and achieving the educational outcomes we desire for our children.”

Ms. Encarnacion highlighted the important role nutrition plays in children’s academic growth.

“Reading to individuals before they are born up until they are three years old is wonderful, but there is also a connection we have to make, and that’s nutrition,” she said. “The Department of Health comes in, not just to look at the resources that are needed to be able to read and grow, but children have to have the nutritional background in order to be able to do so.”

The health commissioner said her department's programs, such as MCH, Infants and Toddlers, and Women Infants and Children, are critical to proper early development in children.

“We are not just handing out books, but we also providing parents with nutritional information,” she said. “This initiative will serve as a comprehensive program to grow our future here in the Virgin Islands.”

According to the release, Cradle Literacy Project organizers invite eligible parents and guardians with children from birth to age three to a drive-through distribution of books in the St. Croix District on Dec. 4 from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. at the Juanita Gardine K-8 School, and in the St. Thomas-St. John District on Dec. 11 from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. at the Charlotte Amalie High School.