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## Pearl B. Larsen Kindergarten Teacher Astral Battiste, Math Educator at BCB Melvin Ledesma Named Teachers of the Year

Education / **Published On December 23, 2022 01:39 PM /**

Staff Consortium **December 23, 2022**

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**Educators Astral Battiste and Melvin Ledesma. By. THE V.I. DEPT. OF EDUCATION**

The V.I. Department of Education announced on Friday Melvin Ledesma, math teacher at the Bertha C. Boschulte Middle School in the St. Thomas-St. John District and Astral Battiste, kindergarten teacher at the Pearl B. Larsen PreK-8 School in the St. Croix District, as the 2022-2023 District Teachers of the Year.

During ceremonies held on Dec. 19 on St. Thomas and Dec. 22 on St. Croix, 11 finalists—six in the St. Thomas-St. John District and five in the St. Croix District—were recognized for their work as caring, passionate, and exemplary educators, the department said. Each teacher's qualifications

were evaluated by an independent panel of judges in the following categories: portfolio (35 pts.), classroom observation (40 pts.) and face-to-face interview (48 pts.). The teacher with the highest number of points was selected as the top teacher in the district.

Education Commissioner Dr. Dionne Wells-Hedrington expressed her pride in the 11 honorees, calling them “experts” in their field.

“We are extremely proud of your dedication, your commitment, and your passion for education,” she said. “We know that teaching is a job of the heart and teachers put a lot into their students. You are surrogate parents, you do everything outside of teaching them, but you’re really responsible for molding our students into who we want them to become. I am elated to be here today among professionals—you are the experts in the room—and we salute you for all that you do.”

During his remarks, BCB Principal Terence Corbett praised the ingenuity and service-orientation of Ledesma, who came to St. Thomas from the Philippines in 2018, as part of the Department’s international teacher recruitment.

“Mr. Ledesma is a teacher that everyone deserves to have in his building,” Corbett said. “We have seen Mr. Ledesma in the classroom and outside of the classroom doing great things with our teachers, students, and parents. I call him that algorithm—where there is a problem, he always knows how to fix it. We honor, salute, and bless you, Mr. Ledesma, as you continue to allow our distinguished torch [at BCB] to never be extinguished. Because of you, our children, and BCB, continue to shine.”

According to D.O.E, in 2012, Ledesma earned a bachelor’s degree in Secondary Education, with a major in Mathematics and honorary distinction of Cum Laude; and in 2017, he earned a Master of Arts in Mathematics. Earlier this year, Ledesma completed the academic requirements for a PhD in Science Education, with a major in Mathematics.

Ledesma began his teaching career as an instructor at the prestigious Ateneo de Zamboanga University in southern Philippines, the same university where he earned his academic degrees. However, he would soon develop a desire to teach younger minds.

“I chose to teach in a junior high school, where I fully realized that I am destined to be a teacher,” he wrote in his biography. “I saw myself in my students, who were eager to complete their education, but were struggling due to financial constraints. I initiated house visits to encourage parents to support their children’s learning, because I believe that education is the key to success.”

Pearl B. Larsen Principal Loretta Moorehead highlighted Battiste’s stellar reputation that preceded the 16-year educator.

“[Before coming to Pearl B. Larsen], I heard a lot about Ms. Battiste, but I got a chance to come into the classroom as her supervisor and see it for myself,” Moorehead said. “Ms. Battiste is one of our outstanding teachers. During the time I have been here, she has received an outstanding rating within the last three years and is now a nominee for the district teacher of the year. Not only does she work collaboratively with her peers, she also works with her parents, is a team player, and is willing to participate in any activity upon request.”

In 2006, Battiste earned a bachelor’s degree in Elementary Education with a concentration in Social Studies from the University of the Virgin Islands. That same year, she began teaching at

Pearl B. Larsen. She is widely known for her creative and inspiring door and classroom decorations, and each school year, parents eagerly await to have their children placed into her Kindergarten class.

Battiste writes in her biography that while she recognizes the importance for rigor and relevance in schools, she “always adds a touch of love and nurturing.”

She added, “Each morning, seeing the bright, inquisitive smiles of the young children has made [me] develop an even deeper understanding and passion for education. Pearl B. Larsen School has molded [me] into being the dynamic teacher [I am] today. I love watching the excitement on [my] students’ faces as they are in awe when they learn and discover something new. Watching them explore concepts and learn different subjects as they begin to learn about the world have inspired [me] to keep fostering growth into these little humans.”

Ms. Battiste lives by the mantra, “it takes a big heart to shape little minds,” and says that “kindergarten has her heart.”

Next, Ledesma and Battiste will face another round of evaluations to determine which of them would represent the Territory as the State Teacher of the Year.

The other finalists in the St. Thomas-St. John District included Jacqueline Francis, Sandra Cornwall-E’Bas, Lydia Mulcare-Harris, Natasha Wright, and Carishma Romney. Other finalists in the St. Croix District included Beverly James, Linda James, Cherise Davis, and Kimberly Nelson.

The department said the winners and finalists received cash prizes, trophies and recognition plaques, flowers, and various tokens of appreciation.