

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Newly Sworn In Education Commissioner Seeks to Transform Learning, Faces Monumental Task of Managing Billions to Rebuild Territory's Schools

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Dionne Wells-Hedrington is sworn-in as Education Commissioner by Judge Deborah Watlington, presiding judge of the V.I. Superior Court. By. GOV'T HOUSE

Dr. Dionne Wells-Hedrington was sworn in as the new commissioner in the Department of Education during a ceremony at The Battery in St. John, USVI earlier today.

She now has the responsibility of overseeing and helping to develop the public school system to aid 11,000 students.

Ms. Wells-Hedrington was nominated by Governor Bryan on August 3rd, 2022 shortly after the resignation of Racquel Berry-Benjamin and has acted as commissioner since then.

Since her nomination, Ms. Wells-Hedrington has been petitioning for an environment where employees, parents and citizens can work together to see that the changes needed at schools are achieved.

She did the same again on Wednesday morning, saying, "This is not a job that I take lightly, nor is it one that I can do alone. I am as good as the employees who work at the Department of Education....Unity is strength. When there is teamwork and collaboration, wonderful things can be achieved."

The department's goal, which Ms. Wells-Hedrington champions, is to "reform, rebuild and rebrand public education" to ensure that the opportunities provided to children adequately prepare them to be productive citizens.

"I don't have all the answers but what I do have is passion and a desire to transform this department and to ensure that every single student that enters our school system leaves through our doors ready for college, military or the workforce," she said. "We are creating a pipeline of success for every single student, no child left behind."

Governor Bryan praised the newly sworn-in commissioner even as he spoke of the monumental task at hand of managing hundreds of millions of dollars provided to the territory after Hurricanes Irma and Maria, to rebuild destroyed and damaged schools. "With Dionne, it is like, she is so passionate she would do the job for free," he said. "She is about, and I try to get all my Cabinet members remember, it's not about running the Department of Education. You're about producing great Virgin Islands children. And what a gift to be able to influence 8,000 souls right now."

He added, "Over the next four years, she will manage over \$800 million. Next to the Government of the Virgin Islands, she has the most employees in the Territory. You didn't see her stutter when the judge asked her, 'Without mental reservations,'" Governor Bryan said. "The difference between a fool and a brave person is, a fool doesn't know the danger. A brave person moves despite the danger, acknowledging what that danger is. I think that's one thing about her. She is a brave person. Dionne ain't afraid of nothing. She has a boldness of spirit."

During her tenure as acting commissioner, Ms. Wells-Hedrington was faced with a multitude of challenges including school plant repairs, managing online learning and dealing with administrative qualms between the Dept. of Education and the Board of Education.

When the 2022/2023 school year began in September, she was then plagued by a shortage of professional educators, a rise in in-school Covid-19 cases, and truancy.

But her message of stakeholders working together has always remained the same, as she works to improve education in the territory.

Ms. Wells-Hedrington's swearing-in took place exactly one year after the passing of her father, who she credits for instilling proper values and morals. Her family is also mourning the recent death of her aunt, who was expected to attend today's ceremony.

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