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# Education Officials Provide Update on Summer Programs; Lawmakers Probe Adequacy of Student Progress Tracking

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Representatives from the V.I. Department of Education updated members of the Senate Committee on Education & Workforce Development on what the department was doing in preparation for the upcoming school year, and how the territory's children had been engaging in summer educational activities.

On a departmental level, Education Commissioner Dr. Dionne Wells-Hedrington said the department was "reforming, rebranding, and rebuilding" public education in the Virgin Islands. The transformational plan includes a digitization effort for departmental processes, updating standard operating procedures, and improving pedagogy and learning. The commissioner mentioned the adoption of online registration as one successful step towards digitization, and the

forthcoming implementation of an online cash management system as another imminent step in the right direction. "That system should be in place by the end of this calendar year," said the commissioner, explaining that it would be used by parents and guardians to pay for school-related costs, activities and fundraisers digitally.

Dr. Wells-Hedrington also spoke of her department's work in ensuring quality learning experiences throughout the school system. One thrust in that area is the adoption of site-based management, which she says allows principals the flexibility to design programs that cater to the needs of their specific student populations, and develop targeted goals for their campuses. For the first time in many years, Dr. Wells-Hedrington indicated that schools would be individually evaluated based on their academic performance.

Report cards will be issued for each school using data from spring 2023. A star rating system will measure performance based on four indicators: achievement, growth/graduation rates, English language proficiency, and absenteeism rate. In this way, struggling schools can be identified for support, said Mrs. Wells-Hedrington. That support will be provided through the Education Turnaround Office, which D.O.E. is currently working to launch. "The goal of this unit is to provide intense support in schools, holding them accountable for the results while limiting the operational obstacles and focusing the work on teaching and learning," the education commissioner explained.

The insular superintendents spoke separately to give committee members updates on activities in their respective districts. For St. Thomas/St. John, Dr. Stefan Jürgen covered a range of programs designed to enhance academic skills, provide support, and prepare students of the next grade level.

Over 1100 students are currently enrolled in general summer enrichment programs across St. Thomas and St. John, Mr. Jürgen said, including special education students, English language learners, and general education students. Approximately middle and highschoolers received targeted programming in the areas of mathematics, science and the arts during the STEAM Summer Enrichment program, solving real-world problems and engaging in project-based learning and collaborative learning experiences.

Meanwhile, over 100 students participated in the Summer Bridge Program, designed to help children transition from elementary to middle school, and from eighth to ninth grade. Jürgen revealed that 293 students across the two islands participated in the Credit Recovery Program (CRP), which gives middle, junior, and high school students a second chance at academic success by allowing them to retake courses they failed during the regular year. The Adult Continuing Education (ACE) credit recovery program served 27 participants, all of whom successfully completed the requirements. A score of students took part in a program to prepare them for skill-based careers such as interior and exterior painting, basic carpentry, and basic air conditioning and refrigeration, while several students with exception academic performance were selected to attend programs at Emory and Harvard universities, as well as Berklee College of Music.

Mr. Jürgen made special mention of one specific data point – the students who have consistently participated in the Saturday Academy program, which provides additional hours of Math and English language instruction, have outscored their counterparts in those subject areas by 10-15 percentage points on diagnostic tests for the past two years.

The St. Croix district also hosted a multitude of programs for young learners, said Ericilda Ottley-Herman, insular superintendent for that district. Those included the Academic Enrichment and

Interest-based Summer Academies, a 6-week program in which students spent the first session of the day engaged in “academic tutorials and interventions primarily in reading and mathematics,” according to Ms. Ottley-Herman. The second session each day was for students to participate in activities according to their interest: gardening, coding, art, and others.

A transition program for the youngest learners helped 50 children “receive instruction and preparation for entering kindergarten,” Ms. Ottley-Herman said. Like students on the other islands, St. Croix children also had the opportunity to participate in Summer Bridge programs; on the Big Island, these initiatives were for those entering seventh and ninth grades. Rather than focus on academics, the bridge programs teach children executive function skills like time management and organization, crucial to success at higher learning levels. Self-esteem building activities and social-emotional activities are also included as part of that program.

St. Croix’s credit recovery program served 227 students, Ms. Ottley-Herman told lawmakers. She was happy to report that since school year 2021, her district has recorded a steady decrease in post-summer retention of students at the same grade level.

The Big Island’s STEM Research Academy and the Computer Science Academy hosted 66 and 25 students respectively. Students who wished to improve their band skills participated in the Music Academy.

Five Crucian middle schoolers received the opportunity to attend a week-long coding program at the Berkeley campus of the University of California, while 22 high school students went to Yale University for a two-week program.

During the discussion that followed the in-depth presentations of Department of Education officials, Senator Donna Frett-Gregory brought up the question of how student success or performance is tracked across their academic career.

Mr. Jürgen reassured that D.O.E. was aware of which students did not pass their credit recovery, and said they were enrolled in new classes to recover those credits in the fall, and are being supported by student success specialists.

However, Ms. Frett-Gregory pressed for further clarification on how these students were tracked in the previous year and how they intend to prevent school dropouts. At first, Mr. Jürgen attempted to explain that students who failed a course during credit recovery were placed in those courses during the first semester of the following year.

Ms. Ottley-Herman shared that on St. Croix, students who participated in credit recovery programs are “flagged” in the PowerSchool system in order to track performance and academic progress.

Dr. Wells-Hedrington agreed with the use of the flagging method, but acknowledged the need for a comprehensive tracking tool for students, emphasizing the department's goal to close the achievement gap through initiatives teaching the science of reading and math.

"I fully understand what you're saying, senator, in terms of a tracking tool. Right now, I don't know a specific tool that exists. But I will do my due diligence to work with the superintendents to identify that that is a valid concern...I think we need to delve a little bit deeper. And that's a conversation that the superintendents and I will have in terms of ensuring not only flagging but providing alternative opportunities for them to recover the credits."

