

***WORKING TOGETHER TO IMPROVE
STUDENT PERFORMANCE***

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It is a special honor to be asked to speak to the members of the Board of Education at this sacred moment when you are sworn in to assume this awesome responsibility. I want to thank UVI Board of Trustees member, and sitting Board of Education Chairperson, Ms. Winona Hendricks, for the invitation. You are the caretakers of educational quality in this Territory. You are the guardians of excellence; you are our guiding stars in our moments of educational darkness.

These may seem like lofty words that have no relationship to what you do each day, but they do capture your true calling, and mine as well. The words capture the essence of what all educators should be striving to achieve in their professional lives.

It is only when we begin to see ourselves as insignificant players in a drama beyond our control that our students suffer and this territory moves backwards. So I am here to inspire you more than to tell you something you do not already know.

There are no new secrets to academic quality and excellence. It has been demonstrated time and time again that there are three fundamental ingredients for academic quality. They are: (1) excellent and dedicated teachers, (2) working with motivated students, (3) who are operating in a supportive educational and life environment. Together, these ingredients produce academic excellence.

So, we know what is needed. Our challenge is best stated in the form of a question: "How do we, in a comprehensive and consistent manner, create these conditions in the Virgin Islands?" The answer is not simple, nor without a major investment of time, energy, and resources.

The reason this quest for educational excellence is so critical is that the future of the Virgin Islands depends on what we do as educational leaders. All statistical indicators point to the fact that when children do not obtain a quality education that motivates them to learn, they are more likely to engage in negative social behavior such as crime, violence, and drug use. The data also reveals that the economic development of a region is directly related to the level of education that exists within the work force. Even infant mortality rates, life expectancy, and overall health are related to educational attainment.

This Territory is painting a bleak future for itself if we cannot, in our life time, turn this problem around. If we don't address this challenge, the sun will still rise, the ocean will still remain brilliant and warm, but those who will bathe in the full beauty of what these islands provide, will not be from here.

After the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the urban riots which followed, President Lyndon Johnson created a Kerner Commission to study the causes of the riots and to make recommendation for the future of America in regards to the social conditions that created the riots.

One of the most famous lines from the Kerner Report (1968), which served as the basis for the implementation of numerous social programs was the following: "Our nation is moving towards two societies – one black and one white; separate and unequal (p. 1)." I fear that these same words are omens for the Virgin Islands. Though the disparity may not solely be along racial lines, the results will be the same. We are on the path of creating a Territory of "haves" and "have nots" – a Territory of the educated and those who fell off the education train; a Territory of tourist and visitors who bathe in the beauty of the Virgin Islands and of poorly educated locals who merely exist in paradise.

To avoid this scenario, we must make the quest for quality education and excellence a greater priority. It must be a cry from every mountaintop and seaside. It must pour out of our mouths but also out of the policies we create and the actions we take as educational leaders.

So, what do we see as some key interventions we can take that move us down this road to improving the quality of education for the children and adults of the Virgin Islands?

First, we must ensure that all of the key educational stakeholders are coming together at the same table, with the same agenda on a consistent basis in order to ensure that our goals and strategies are aligned. The P-16 Collaborative that we created a year and a half ago, based on models throughout the nation, can serve as that forum. It includes members of the University, the Board of Education, and the Department of Education. We also believe that the Department of Human Services should be at the table as well. The Collaborative attempts to align the curriculum and expectations from the beginning to the end of the educational life cycle. This group has been attempting to carry out the spirit of cooperation that I am urging, but I would be the first to admit that we have a long ways to go. I believe we must infuse new life and a greater determination into this effort.

If the P-16 Collaborative is not the answer, then let's find one. The University is committed to doing whatever we can to bring to the table those who can address this awesome challenge. We don't have all the answers, but we are committed to exploring them with others. The reality is that none of us can solve this problem by ourselves. We will only turn this ship if all hands are on deck. And, the ship will turn as we apply the three ingredients.

Ingredient #1: Creating Excellent and Dedicated Teachers The University must play a critical role in this part of the formula. The teachers we produce must be educated and trained in a manner that allows them to convey their knowledge and extract the knowledge from their students in a meaningful and dynamic manner. Our new strategic plan commits us to "becoming an outstanding teacher preparation university." We have already begun work to ensure that our curriculum is as innovative and cutting edge as it can be and that it relates to the needs of Virgin Islands' students.

However, there are existing teachers who we must work with and inspire to ensure that they are achieving their full potential. Excellent teachers are not born; they are fashioned out of the circumstances within which they find themselves. We must create a culture of excellence within all of our educational institutions. This is not a criticism of any individual or organization. It is a statement of aspiration which none of us should deny.

In your role as members of the Board of Education, and as education leaders, we must develop and implement policies and programs that cultivate and reward excellence. We cannot accept anything less. We must create high standards, and we must ensure that we are empowering both our teachers and students to meet those standards.

Any board member or president, like any teacher, can create high hurdles for students to jump over. But the true educator also develops viable strategies and approaches that empower and compel others to jump over those high hurdles. This is our dual responsibility that we must never forsake.

Research demonstrates that excellent teachers must be *knowledgeable, engaging, creative* and *clear in their goals and objectives*. Students must know that teachers care, and they must be able to teach students to think critically and not just memorize dates and figures. They must create a classroom environment that allows students to connect what they are learning to the world around them. Teachers must be able to inspire students to see the “compelling story” of their lives and be excited about writing that story on the face of history.

These are lofty values and ideals which every teacher will not be able to embrace and master. Even those who do embrace them will not be able to live up to these standards every day. However, this must be our model; for this is what the evidence says creates excellence in the classroom.

Thus your mission, if you accept it, is to create policies, programs and standards that embed these qualities mentioned above in all of our teachers and educational administrators. I know that there are barriers to achieve these goals, and you don’t control every aspect of the educational process. But, as the great educational leader Booker T. Washington said, “Cast down your bucket where you are (p. 204).”

There are things beyond our control, but there is more than what we know that is within our control. If we focus on our limits and what we don’t have, we will never fully utilize the power and influence we do have.

Ingredient #2: Motivated Students Another aspect of the challenge we face is how we motivate students to want to learn, and not just go through the motions. How do we, through policies and programs, excite students about the transformative powers of their educational experience? Though teachers are on the frontline of this quest, this is one that they cannot achieve alone. The motivation of students towards a culture of excellence and creativity is a collective challenge which all of us must embrace.

One educational expert, Jere Brophy (1987) defines student motivation to learn as “... a competence acquired through general experience but stimulated most directly through modelling, communication of expectations, and direct instruction or socialization by significant others (especially parents and teachers) (p. 40) [Emphasis added].”

A key aspect of this description of student motivation is that it is an *acquired competence*. Though all of us are born with a motivation to understand and learn about the world around us, depending on the circumstances of our lives, this intrinsic value can be stifled or even totally destroyed.

Linda Lumsden (1994) states: "When children are raised in a home that nurtures a sense of self-worth, competence, autonomy, and self-efficacy, they will be more apt to accept the risks inherent in learning. Conversely, when children do not view themselves as basically competent and able, their freedom to engage in academically challenging pursuits and capacity to tolerate and cope with failure are greatly diminished (p. 3)." Thus, we must try to encourage parents to be more involved – at an early stage – in helping to nurture a spirit of curiosity, self-confidence, and self-worth.

This is the message we must promote through churches, social organizations, cultural events, and any avenue in which we live. For many, this value has to be acquired through a process that we as adults, and especially educational leaders, are responsible for creating.

That is the other part of the description which is critical to student motivation. Brophy (1987) indicates that it is "*stimulated ... through modelling, communication of expectations, and direct instruction ...by significant others* ..." (p. 40)." Teachers, parents, adult relatives and those of us in this room are the significant others responsible for creating an environment where all Virgin Islands' students become motivated learners.

We must model a deep quest for excellence by exhibiting that value in everything we do, especially when students see us. If reading, thinking critically, and being respectful are not the things they see when they observe their significant others, then it will be difficult for them to embrace this value. Thus, we must make excellence a hallmark of our culture if we want our students to be motivated to learn.

We must also create *extrinsic rewards* that motivate them as well. Though we have numerous existing awards and scholarships related to student achievement, we must develop even greater incentives that compel students to achieve.

We are engaged in a battle for the hearts and minds of the youth of this community. If we think we can win this war by just praying for them we are mistaken. Though prayer is critical, when we get up off our knees we must go to work in thinking and planning about how we capture the imaginations of the students in our institutions, communities, and families. There are forces in their environment that encourage them to pursue paths that provide immediate gratification. Though we know that those paths will harm them and us in the long run, and sometimes even in the short run, we have to provide them with compelling reasons to not only stay on the educational pathway, but to excel.

Ingredient #3: An Environment in Which Students Can Learn The final ingredient that is key to academic excellence is the environment in which students live and learn. Though it is difficult for those in this room to influence the changes needed in the homes and community in which many of our students live, we should become advocates for the improvement in the quality of the infrastructure of our schools.

Where students learn, and the conditions that surround that learning, send powerful messages to learners about their self-worth, and the value that others are placing on them and on the learning process.

Even in these fiscally constrained times, I have been using every dollar I can get my hands on to enhance the infrastructure of the University. We have created new living facilities, remodelled many of our classrooms, and are constructing new laboratories, because I deeply believe that it has an impact on the instruction that is given and the learning that occurs.

I have reviewed the most recent Facilities Report issued by this Board to the Governor and it is clear that we have numerous facility challenges. However, even if all of the issues raised in the report were addressed, we still have a ways to go in order to match the overall quality of educational facilities that exist within most states.

The quality of our public school facilities must become a greater priority in the future if we want excellence to be fully embedded and embraced in the culture. Though these decisions are not directly within your purview, each of you must become an advocate for those educational matters that make a difference.

So in conclusion, I charge you to become advocates for excellence. I charge you to use your role and powers to construct the three pillars of academic excellence, which are:

Excellent and motivated teachers, motivated students, and quality learning environments – all of these pillars require resources, but they also require policies and programs. The pillars require advocates who will not forsake the educational calling which lies before them.

I pray that God will provide each of you the strength and wisdom to be the type of board member that this community richly deserves and badly needs. I also pray that we all can work together to transform this Territory into an oasis of excellence. As one anonymous author once wrote:

“Excellence can be obtained if you:
Care more than others think is wise;
Risk more than others think is safe;
Dream more than others think is practical;
Expect more than others think is possible.”

Let us create an educational culture where caring, risking, dreaming and expecting great things is the norm for all educators and students and not limited to a few exceptions. If we can do that, then the Virgin Islands of the future will be much brighter than the present, and you will be one of the reasons for this major transformation.

I wish you Godspeed.

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