

Remarks by
Premier of the Virgin Islands
Honourable Dr. Natalio D. Wheatley

At the
2024 Professional Development Day
The Eileen Parsons Auditorium
H. Lavity Stoutt Community College Campus

26 August, 2024

As a former educator – and I use the word “former” loosely because once you have that passion for imparting knowledge and moulding others it never really goes away - I have always found Professional Day to be particularly useful for getting re-focused for the start of the school term and academic year.

Hopefully, you had a long and relaxing August break, and you were able to indulge in the festivities and many activities throughout the Territory over the past few weeks as we celebrated our 70th Anniversary of Emancipation Festival in the Virgin Islands and 190 years since the Emancipation of our fore parents from the bondage of slavery. Hopefully you got the chance to take some rest and recharge your batteries, and to spend time with your family and loved ones to strengthen those bonds.

It is good to have this week to gradually switch gears and transition back to work and school mode; and to compose your thoughts and your plans for the term and year ahead.

What I also appreciate about the “Summer Institute” concept is that it presents an opportunity for continuing and enhancing the professional development of the participants.

This year, we are continuing with our theme for education, “Virgin Islands Education: Moving Full S.T.E.A.M. Ahead”. We adopted this theme some years ago recognizing the dynamic environment that faces our children today. We recognize that the global economic space is extremely

competitive, and in order to survive and to thrive, our young people need the skills that are relevant to what is happening in the world in science, technology and virtually every aspect of life. We have therefore put the focus on Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics. We recognize the importance of Arts in creativity, innovation and expression, so we have added the “A” to get “STEAM”.

The evidence shows that our students are responding well to this focus – and that is very much a reflection of the positive work of our educators who are making learning fun and engaging for our students.

But, may I also say that it is not just our students who have to deal with a changing environment. The teaching environment is also constantly changing – bombarded by technology, new knowledge, new methodologies, a new profile of student who is being raised with the World Wide Web at their finger-tips and a greater familiarity with the modern-day gadgets. There are new studies being published regularly providing insights into techniques which are more effective for promoting learning and others that are less effective or even harmful or counter-productive.

So just as we are preparing our students for an ever-evolving world and a new landscape, so too we must acknowledge that there is a need for educators to be on a path of constant development – constantly updating your knowledge, reviewing and revising your methods, and pivoting as necessary. And this is where I believe Professional Day and Summer Institute makes its greatest impact. It is a forum for engaging in meaningful professional development, sharing among yourselves your knowledge and thoughts on best practices, and exploring innovative approaches to teaching and learning.

I urge all our participants to make the most of the discourses and exercises over the next few days. Participate as fully as you can. It will be to your benefit – and to the benefit of your students.

Let me say there is no doubt over your commitment to our children and our country. We have all seen our educators and administrative staff pushing through in less than ideal conditions. It has been a recurring conversation for some time. As Premier, and in my prior capacity as Minister of Education, I have always expressed agreement that our educators and administrative and

support staff deserve decent physical conditions to perform their roles safely and effectively, and they deserve to be compensated fairly. I have said the same for all our public officers.

Let me take this time to recognize the minister of Education, Honourable Sharie de Castro, who has fought very hard for educators to have better working conditions and to be compensated fairly.

We have been repairing and upgrading school facilities. We built the new Elmore Stoutt High School building the L. Adorothy Turnbull L-shaped building. We followed through on the construction of the Jost Van Dyke Primary School. We have done a lot of work on other schools as well. Althea Scatliffe Primary School was allowed to reach the condition of being unsafe for occupancy. It has fallen to us to rebuild it, and we will.

My Government has been addressing the situation with salaries. We have approved the new minimum wage for the private sector. We are also making the tough decisions to proceed with the new salary structure for our public officers.

I wish simply to reassure our educators, non-teaching staff and public officers that you have the support of this Government. We are committed to ensuring that you have what you need to be able to advance education in ways that prepare our students to thrive in an ever-evolving and highly competitive world. There will always be room for improvement but by collaboration, cooperation and treating with each other with mutual respect, we can achieve a lot – as we have done for the past several years of our relationship.

Looking ahead, I wish all our educators and non-academic staff a pleasant and productive new school year. May you achieve all of your professional goals. And may you continue to be blessed for your hard work and dedication to our young people.

I thank you.