

STATEMENT

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Statement By Honourable Vincent Wheatley On World Obesity Day 2025

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Education Month 2025: Innovate, Inspire, Transform: A Reimagined Education for All *Strengthening Education Through Infrastructure, Professional Development, and Resources*

Good morning, everyone.

It is with great pride and immense gratitude that I stand before you today to officially launch Education Month 2025—a time for reflection, celebration, and, most importantly, action. This is more than just an annual observance; it is a reaffirmation of our shared commitment to shaping a future where every learner in the Virgin Islands is empowered to thrive.

Education is the bedrock of progress—the foundation upon which strong nations are built. It is the engine that drives economic growth, the spark that fuels innovation, and the thread that binds together a resilient, forward-thinking society. Our mandate is clear: we must create an education system that not only meets the needs of today but anticipates the demands of tomorrow. We must be bold, innovative, and relentless in our pursuit of excellence.

The Virgin Islands can no longer afford to rely solely on traditional teaching methods and outdated structures. We must be bold in reimagining learning—integrating new technologies, diversifying our curriculum, and ensuring that every student is equipped with the skills and mindset needed to lead in the 21st century.

Investing in STEAM Education

Central to this transformation is our investment in STEAM education—Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics. STEAM is the key to unlocking innovation, problem-solving, and critical thinking—skills that are essential for our

students to compete on the global stage.

Over the past year, we have made tremendous strides in STEAM, empowering our students to think like engineers, designers, and inventors. Robotics is not just about machines; it is about teaching students to embrace challenges, persist through failure, and create solutions that will shape the future.

This year's theme, "Innovate, Inspire, Transform: A Reimagined Education for All," underscores our vision for a modern, inclusive, and forward-thinking education system. We are moving Virgin Islands education Full STEAM Ahead! —investing in Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics to equip our students with the skills to lead in a world driven by digital transformation and global competition.

Honouring the Legacy of Honourable Hamilton Lavity Stoutt

This Education Month holds special significance as we honour the legacy of the late Honourable Hamilton Lavity Stoutt, whose vision for education transformed opportunities for Virgin Islanders. His unwavering belief that education is the key to national success continues to inspire us as we push the boundaries of what is possible.

It was his passion for learning that led to the establishment of the H. Lavity Stoutt Community College, ensuring that Virgin Islanders, like myself, had access to higher education. His legacy reminds us that education is not just an individual achievement but a collective investment in the prosperity of our people.

As we reflect on his contributions, let us rededicate ourselves to the cause he championed. Let us ensure that every child, regardless of background or ability, has access to a high-quality education that empowers them to lead, innovate, and succeed.

Education Month Activities

This month, we invite you to join us in a range of activities designed to engage and inspire:

- **Teach for a Day** – Experience the life of a teacher first-hand.
- **Principals' Leadership Conference** – Focused on transformational leadership.
- **Education Round Table** – Addressing the power of dyslexia and diverse learning needs.
- **Science and Innovation Fair** – Showcasing the brilliance of our students.
- **Youth Symposium** – Giving our students a voice in education reform.
- **Inter-Primary Schools Athletic Championships** – Celebrating sportsmanship and school spirit.

We encourage every student, parent, teacher, and community member to participate. Education is a shared responsibility, and together, we can make an indelible impact on the future of our Territory.

Investing in Infrastructure: Building Schools That Stand the Test of Time

A world-class education system demands world-class facilities. Schools must be more than just buildings—they must be safe, modern, and conducive to learning. Over the past two years, we have made significant strides in improving our education infrastructure.

In 2023, we invested just over \$850,000 in critical school renovations. In 2024, we doubled that amount, spending 1.5 million dollars. This year, we are making our most ambitious investment yet—2.5 million dollars dedicated to upgrading our schools.

Guided by structural assessments, we have identified essential remedial works that require urgent attention. These include waterproofing buildings, repairing roofs, replacing outdated windows and doors, and installing backup power generators. We are upgrading plumbing and air conditioning systems to ensure students and teachers have access to reliable water and a comfortable learning environment. We are also strengthening security by installing new systems to enhance the safety of our schools.

Additionally, five new playgrounds have been installed in partnership with Unite BVI. The Althea Scatliffe Primary School Redevelopment Project is currently in the

design phase. While there have been some delays, Unite BVI is finalising project costings and securing necessary approvals. Once designs are approved, we will provide a definitive timeline for construction this year.

Furthermore, funding has been allocated in this year's budget for the design of a secondary educational facility that supports the development and expansion of critical technical and vocational skills needed to fill gaps in the local labour force.

Our investments are not just about repairs; they are about resilience. By addressing these essential needs, we are ensuring that our schools are prepared to withstand environmental challenges, creating learning spaces that are not only safe but built to endure.

Providing Resources That Inspire Learning

A great education system requires more than just walls and roofs—it needs resources that bring learning to life. In 2023, we spent approximately \$650,000 on classroom resources. In 2024, we tripled our commitment, investing 1.9 million dollars. Through a consultative approach with educators, we have identified and prioritised resource needs across core subjects such as Science, Mathematics, English, and Music. Additionally, as part of our expanded STEAM initiative, our schools have been equipped with 58 smartboards, 18 photocopiers, 360 iPads, 238 chess kits, and hundreds of robotics kits already introduced into our classrooms. In 2025, we will deepen this investment to provide even more essential teaching and learning tools.

A key part of our strategy is enhancing digital learning. This year, we are rolling out comprehensive upgrades to digital platforms, improving internet connectivity, updating hardware, and introducing interactive tools that promote digital literacy. Schools will also receive new photocopiers, secondary school computer labs will be outfitted with modern computers and furniture, and the installation of smartboards will continue.

These are not just numbers—these are tangible investments that are transforming classrooms into dynamic learning environments where curiosity is sparked, knowledge is deepened, and students are empowered to excel.

Investing in Educators: The Heartbeat of Transformation

No education system can thrive without dedicated and well-trained teachers. That is why we have invested significantly in professional development to ensure that our educators have access to the training and qualifications they need to excel.

Last year, almost 50 educators benefitted from targeted professional development opportunities. This year, a cohort of educators has already begun a Certificate in STEAM Education to equip themselves with the skills needed to drive innovation in our classrooms. We are also expanding funding for bachelor's degrees, ensuring that more teachers receive higher education. This year alone, we expect about 70 educators to benefit from both certificate and degree programmes.

The return of the Associate Degree in Education at HLSCC has already seen remarkable success. Moreover, we have given HLSCC a mandate to seek accreditation for the delivery of a full four-year degree, with education as a priority area. In addition to their annual subvention, last year we invested an additional \$900,000 in HLSCC in support of our higher education mandate.

But qualifications alone are not enough. We recognise that retaining and attracting quality educators requires competitive compensation. The recently completed salary review ensures that our teachers' salaries surpass regional standards, making the profession more attractive to talented individuals.

Furthermore, initiatives such as Let's Teach VI, the revitalised Teacher Trainee Programme, and the new Teacher Recruit Programme are building a strong talent pipeline by attracting young BVI Islanders to the profession. These initiatives provide mentored classroom experiences alongside academic studies, ensuring a seamless transition from training to the classroom.

Additionally, education remains a national priority area for scholarships and grants, allowing even more educators to access these opportunities. The Ministry has also created new positions within schools and the Ministry to support our reform agenda, including specialist roles in policy development, human resource development, special education and intervention support, instructional leadership, and career and college readiness. For the first time, we have also established a

pool of substitute teachers to ensure the smooth running of our education system.

Advancing Our Initiatives Through Partnerships

Additionally, we have been fortunate to receive invaluable assistance from donors who share our vision for a stronger education system. Through the implementation of a Donations Policy for Education, the Ministry has partnered with the private sector to support our three priority areas. These partnerships have played a vital role in helping us execute key initiatives that enhance learning opportunities for our students.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to all corporate and individual donors who have generously contributed to the advancement of education in the Virgin Islands. Your investment in our students, schools, and educators is an investment in the future of our Territory. We also extend an open invitation to more businesses and individuals to join this noble cause. Together, we can make a lasting impact and ensure that every child has access to a world-class education.

Future-Proofing Our Education System

All these initiatives underscore that the Virgin Islands is on the right path. We have been proactive and forward-thinking in future-proofing our education system. Through introspection and extensive stakeholder consultations, we have shaped an agenda for educational transformation.

Recent findings by the World Bank confirmed the urgency of this transformation. Their report highlighted a learning crisis in the Caribbean, citing serious gaps in foundational learning that hinder student success and economic growth. The World Bank emphasised the need to modernise educational infrastructure, strengthen digital education, and retain talent within the region.

Here in the Virgin Islands, we are taking decisive action. Our theme for Education Month 2025, "Innovate, Inspire, Transform: A Reimagined Education for All," aligns with this urgent call. We are developing educational infrastructure, funding training and professional development and qualifications for educators, providing critical teaching aids and resources, integrating new technologies, diversifying curricula,

and investing in STEAM education to ensure our students thrive in an evolving global landscape.

With UNESCO's support, this year we will develop a STEAM policy and undergo a comprehensive Education Review to align our policies with international best practices. As we advance, the Virgin Islands has an opportunity to leverage its progress to support the wider region in strengthening educational frameworks.

Call to Action

The time for incremental change has passed. The time for bold, decisive action is now. Our commitment to infrastructure, resources, and teacher development is not just about fixing the present—it is about shaping the future.

I now have the distinct honour of declaring **Education Month 2025** officially open!

Let us move forward with purpose, determination, and an unshakable belief in the power of education. Together, we will **Innovate, Inspire, and Transform** to create a reimagined education system for all as we continue to Move Virgin Islands Education Full STEAM Ahead!

Thank you.