GOVERNMENT OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

STATEMENT

Tel: (284)468-2730
Official Government Website:
https://gov.vg

Remarks by Honourable Sharie B. de Castro - Education Month 2026 Opening Address

Release Date: 3 March, 2026



Good morning. Good morning to our educators. Good morning to our students. Good morning to the people of these beautiful Virgin Islands.

Today, as we launch Education Month 2026, we affirm a truth that every great nation in history has understood: that the true wealth of a country is not found in its bank accounts, but in its classrooms. Not in its buildings, but in its people. And people are built through education.

Education is not simply a sector of national development. Education is the foundation of national development. It is the cornerstone upon which every other pillar stands. Every business begins with an educated mind. Every hospital depends on educated professionals. Every industry relies on educated workers. Every government depends on educated citizens. Education is not separate from nation-building. Education is nation-building.

And that is why, over the last three years, we made a decision as a Government and as a people. We made a decision that we would no longer treat education as an obligation. We would treat it as an investment. An investment in our people. An investment in our economy. An investment in our future.

And today, the evidence of that decision is everywhere. It is in the classrooms. It is in the opportunities now available to our people. It is in the confidence that is being restored across this Territory. And yes — it is in the numbers.

In 2024, the education budget stood at approximately $57 million. In 2025, it increased to $67 million. And in 2026, it now stands at $77 million. A $20 million increase. Thirty-five percent growth. In just two budget cycles. Let me repeat that. Thirty-five percent growth.

Ladies and gentlemen — that is not maintenance. That is transformation.

Because you cannot build a future-focused generation with past-tense investment. You cannot prepare tomorrow’s leaders with yesterday’s systems. And so, we invested deliberately. Strategically. And unapologetically.

We invested in infrastructure, because our children deserve to learn in environments that reflect their value. We invested in resources, because education

cannot happen without tools. We invested in our teachers, because teachers are not just employees. Teachers are architects of the future. And we invested in opportunity by strengthening the H. Lavity Stoutt Community College, because the future economy of the Virgin Islands will be built by Virgin Islanders. And education is how we prepare them.

My people, let me speak plainly. Education is not just about children. Education is about the future of this Territory. It is about whether our people own businesses or work in businesses owned by others. It is about whether our people lead industries or watch from the side-lines. It is about whether the Virgin Islands thrives or survives. Education determines that outcome.

That is why we have aligned education with national development priorities. Because we are not educating for education’s sake. We are educating to build the Virgin Islands. To build our economy. To build our workforce. To build our future.

And that work begins with building the systems that support education. The infrastructure. The resources. The teachers. And the institutions that prepare our people. And this morning, I want to share with you how we have been building them.

If we are building a nation, we must also rebuild the spaces where that nation is educated. Because infrastructure matters. And over the past few years, we have taken deliberate steps to rehabilitate and modernize our school facilities.

In 2024, we delivered just over $1 million in infrastructure repairs and upgrades across our public schools. But we also recognized that in order to accelerate progress, we had to change our approach. We undertook structural assessments across our school system to understand the true condition of our facilities, to identify long-standing post-hurricane damage, and to determine the level of investment required to properly rehabilitate our schools. Because this was not about patching problems. This was about rebuilding strategically.

And that strategy was reflected in our investment. In 2025, we increased funding for school renovation to $2.5 million, an increase of approximately $1.5 million over the previous year, more than doubling what we had delivered just one year

before. And this year, we have gone even further. In 2026, we have allocated $4 million toward school rehabilitation, an additional increase of $1.5 million. Which means that in just two years, we have moved from delivering just over $1 million to investing $4 million in our school infrastructure, nearly quadrupling our investment in our schools.

And that increase is not accidental. It is intentional. Because those structural assessments gave us a clear, data-driven roadmap, allowing us to implement a phased rehabilitation programme, prioritizing the most critical needs first, including roof repairs and roof replacements, replacement of damaged windows and doors, installation and replacement of air-conditioning systems, upgrades to electrical infrastructure, rehabilitation of sewage and drainage systems, installation of backup water systems, installation of backup generator systems and solar infrastructure, construction and rehabilitation of playgrounds and basketball courts, installation of perimeter fencing and campus safety improvements, construction of vending kiosks, and general classroom and campus rehabilitation.

Because this work is not cosmetic. It is structural. It is foundational. It is transformational.

And while those investments have supported the rehabilitation of our existing schools, we have also moved beyond rehabilitation into redevelopment. Because there comes a point where you do not simply repair the past. You build the future.

And among the proudest symbols of that transformation is the Eslyn Henley Richiez Learning Centre. A modern, purpose-built special education school designed and constructed specifically to serve students with special needs. Not retrofitted. Not adapted. But built intentionally to reflect the future of education. And today, it stands as the only purpose-built special education school in the entire OECS region, right here in the Virgin Islands. A declaration that we will lead, not follow, in providing world-class education for all of our children.

And it is that same vision, that same commitment to reimagining education, that is now guiding the rebuilding of the Althea Scatliffe Primary School. Because just as we did with Eslyn Henley, we undertook a full assessment of our school infrastructure and in doing so, we saw an opportunity. An opportunity to reimagine

what a primary school can and should be. To deliver our first fully modern, purpose-built primary school designed not for yesterday, but for tomorrow. With modern, technology-enabled classrooms, resilient, future-focused infrastructure, and learning environments designed to support the full development of every child.

And I am pleased to say that we are now on our way to breaking ground on the Althea Scatliffe Primary School before the end of the second quarter of this year.

And that future-focused investment continues. This year, we have also allocated funding for the design of a new secondary technical school on the eastern end of Tortola. A facility that will expand access, expand opportunity, and support technical and applied learning aligned with the future of our economy. Because education must not only prepare our students academically, it must prepare them for life. Because when you build schools, you build students. And when you build students, you build the Virgin Islands.

But buildings alone do not educate children. What happens inside those buildings does. And that is why we have made equally historic investments in resourcing our schools.

If infrastructure builds the walls of education, then resources bring those walls to life. Because schools cannot function on office supplies alone. And for too long, resourcing our schools meant replenishing basic office supplies.

But over the past few years, we made a deliberate shift. A phased shift. An intentional shift. Away from simply supplying schools to strategically equipping them. Subject by subject. Programme by programme. Year by year.

And that transformation is visible across this Territory.

We reinstituted and expanded the systematic purchase of teaching and learning aids across core subject areas. In Mathematics and Science, we procured updated laboratory equipment, manipulatives, and instructional tools. In Technical and Vocational Education, we upgraded specialized tools aligned to industry standards. In Music and the Creative Arts, we expanded instructional resources. In Literacy and Language, we strengthened classroom libraries. We invested in classroom furniture, teacher workstations, photocopiers, and printers, ensuring that teachers

have the tools they need to teach. Because resources are not an expense. They are an investment in instructional quality.

And modernization required a major investment in Information and Communication Technology. We restored and equipped computer laboratories at Elmore Stoutt High School, Bregado Flax Educational Centre, Virgin Islands School of Technical Studies, and the Claudia Creque Educational Centre.

Across our schools, we deployed 192 new desktop computers and 80 Promethean Interactive Panels. We introduced immersive virtual and augmented reality tools. We upgraded network infrastructure. We modernized PowerSchool. And implemented Schoology, allowing us to track student progress, guide intervention, and make data-driven decisions. Because modern education must be guided not by guesswork, but by information.

Through our Special Education Management System, we are now supporting 262 students receiving specialized services, including 55 students supported through Individualized Education Plans.

We strengthened national assessments. Key Stage results now return in three months. EPE results in six to eight weeks. Which means intervention happens sooner. Support happens sooner. And success happens sooner.

And today, we are seeing the results.

At the primary level, Grade 2 literacy proficiency stands at 84 percent. Grade 6 literacy stands at 86 percent.

At the secondary level, 412 students sat CSEC examinations. Our English pass rate reached 97.63 percent. And we achieved 100 percent pass rates in eight subject areas.

But ladies and gentlemen, we are also clear-eyed about where our work continues. Mathematics remains a national priority. And while challenges remain, we are seeing real progress. CSEC Mathematics performance has improved, increasing from 48 percent to over 52 percent in 2024. And importantly, while we continue to surpass the regional average, and we are moving in the right direction, we are not

satisfied. Because our goal is not simply to be better than average. Our goal is to be excellent.

Which is why we are strengthening mathematics instruction, investing in teacher development, and expanding student support. Because when we strengthen instruction, we strengthen performance. And when we strengthen performance, we strengthen futures.

And even as we strengthen core academic performance, we are also witnessing something equally powerful — a surge in innovation, creativity, and global competitiveness among our students.

457 students are now engaged in STEAM programmes. Robotics enrollment increased by 64 percent. Robotics pass rates reached 100 percent. And our national robotics team, once ranked 143rd in the world, is now ranked 42nd in the world, Number One in the OECS, competing globally and proving that Virgin Islands students can compete with anyone, anywhere.

And our investment in resources extends beyond technology and traditional academics into the creative and cultural development of our students. Because education must develop the whole child. Not just the mind, but the talent within them.

Through our partnership with the United Jazz Foundation, led by internationally acclaimed Virgin Islands musician Mr. Dion Parsons, we have invested in the professional development of our music educators, equipping them with new instructional techniques, global exposure, and advanced training. At the same time, we are working strategically to expand access to musical instruments across our secondary schools, ensuring that students not only learn music in the classroom, but have the opportunity to take instruments home, practice, and develop their craft. Because talent cannot grow without tools. And opportunity cannot grow without access.

We are also preparing to reopen pathways for our students to attend the world-renowned Interlochen Summer Music Camp, creating opportunities for international exposure, growth, and excellence. And we are rebuilding our national student

music programme, creating pathways for our young musicians to perform, to travel, and to represent the Virgin Islands across the region and beyond. Because when we invest in our students, we invest in their potential. And when we invest in their potential, we invest in the cultural future of the Virgin Islands.

Ladies and gentlemen, this is what happens when you invest in education. This is what happens when you equip classrooms. This is what happens when you modernize systems. Because when you invest in students, you build the Virgin Islands.

But buildings do not teach children. Resources do not teach children. Teachers do. And that is why our greatest investment has been in our people.

If we are building a nation, we must build the people who will teach that nation. And that is exactly what we have done. And what I am about to share represents our overall approach over the past few years to rebuilding, strengthening, and securing the teacher pipeline in the Virgin Islands. Not by chance. But by design.

Over the past two years alone, we created 20 teacher trainee positions, bringing young Virgin Islanders into the profession and placing them on a structured pathway toward full qualification. But we did not stop there.

We rebuilt the professional certification pipeline. Eleven educators completed the Certificate in Teaching at HLSCC. Fifteen more are currently in training. We strengthened leadership in our schools. Twenty-three school leaders completed the Certificate in Effective School Leadership at HLSCC. Thirteen more are preparing to step into leadership roles.

Through our partnership with the University of the Virgin Islands, ten teachers completed the Certificate in Secondary Education. And at the same time, we are securing the future of the profession.

Twenty-seven Virgin Islanders are pursuing their Associate Degree in Education at HLSCC. Fourteen educators are advancing through the Postgraduate Diploma in Arts Integration. And fifteen teachers are pursuing their Bachelor’s Degrees in Education through our partnership with Walden University.

This means that today, nearly 150 Virgin Islanders are either certified or actively in training to become educators.

Every one of these programmes represents direct Government investment in building our teaching workforce. In these Ministry-funded programmes, the Government covers the overwhelming majority of the cost, with educators contributing just 10 percent in some instances, ensuring both national investment and personal commitment to their professional growth.

And beyond these programmes, through the Ministry's structured national scholarships and assistance grant processes, we are supporting additional educators to pursue their Bachelor's, Master's, and Doctoral degrees, further expanding the strength and leadership of our education system.

This is not accidental. This is intentional. This is the result of a deliberate strategy and direct Government investment in rebuilding the teaching profession in the Virgin Islands.

And the impact is already clear. Teacher retention is improving. Interest in the profession has grown. More Virgin Islanders are stepping forward, answering the call to teach. Because when you invest in teachers, you restore pride in the profession. And when you restore pride, you rebuild the profession.

And we are not finished yet.

This month, we will host a national engagement session for educators to connect them directly to Government-funded opportunities to upskill in critical shortage areas: Special education. Technical education. Leadership. Policy. Curriculum support. Because we are not waiting for the future. We are preparing for it. We are building specialist capacity. We are building leadership capacity. We are building national capacity.

Ladies and gentlemen, this is one of the most comprehensive teacher workforce investments in our history. We are not just filling vacancies. We are building a pipeline. A sustainable pipeline. A strategic pipeline. A Virgin Islands pipeline.

Because when you build teachers, you build classrooms. When you build classrooms, you build students. And when you build students, you build the Virgin Islands.

And that pipeline leads directly to one institution — The H. Lavity Stoutt Community College.

If our primary and secondary schools are building the foundation, then the H. Lavity Stoutt Community College is building the future workforce of the Virgin Islands.

And today, I want the people of this Territory to understand clearly where your college stands. Because HLSCC is not simply operating. It is advancing. It is evolving. And it holds a distinction that no other national college in this region holds. It is the only internationally accredited national college in the entire OECS. That distinction belongs to the Virgin Islands. It means that the qualifications earned here meet global standards. It means that our students are competing on an international level. And it means that excellence is being built right here at home.

That strength is reflected in its growth. Enrolment has increased from 609 students in 2019 to 786 students in 2025, a 29 percent increase, and the highest enrolment in the past five years. And through the MA:DE dual enrolment programme, the number of secondary students earning college credits increased from 77 students in 2024 to 149 students in 2025, a 94 percent increase in just one year. These are Virgin Islands students leaving high school already positioned to advance their education and accelerate their future.

But today, I want to speak personally. Because HLSCC is not just the national college. It is my college. I stand before you as a proud alumna of the H. Lavity Stoutt Community College. I know first-hand what it represents. I know the doors it opens. And I believe deeply in the dream of the visionary who founded it, that the people of the Virgin Islands should be able to pursue excellence right here at home.

It was from that belief that I gave the College a clear mandate: to pursue four-year degree-granting status. And today, I am proud to announce that we are officially on that path.

The Bachelor of Education programme has been approved by the College Board and will now be submitted to the Middle States Commission on Higher Education for accreditation review, the necessary step toward offering a full four-year teaching degree here in the Virgin Islands.

At the same time, the Ministry has been intentionally building the pipeline to support that future. Over the past two years, the Ministry of Education has created 20 teacher trainee positions, filled with young Virgin Islanders who have committed themselves to the teaching profession. Those trainees are enrolled at HLSCC alongside others pursuing studies in education. These individuals have a clear pathway to becoming qualified educators right here at home, strengthening our classrooms and strengthening the future of education in the Virgin Islands.

That evolution is not just academic. It is physical. It is structural. It is institutional.

Since 2019, the College's net assets have grown from $11.6 million to $33.8 million, a 191 percent increase. The College has acquired a residential apartment building at Paraquita Bay, creating housing capacity for visiting faculty, Fulbright scholars, and international partners. And the Government has funded the design of the College's first purpose-built student dormitory, laying the foundation for a fully residential campus and expanding what HLSCC can offer to future generations.

Because strong institutions build strong nations.

We are also strengthening training aligned directly with our economy. On March 10th, the College will officially relaunch its internationally recognised maritime certification programme, allowing Virgin Islands mariners to train and certify right here at home once again. And later this month, in partnership with the College, we will launch Let's Build VI, mobilising approximately $200,000 in scholarships for maritime training, technical and skilled trades certifications, and new opportunities in hospitality and luxury tourism education. Because building the Virgin Islands requires skilled Virgin Islanders.

At the same time, we are expanding opportunity beyond our shores. This work began with articulation agreements already secured with Richmond American International University and the New Model Institute of Technology and Engineering in the United Kingdom.

Last week, we built on that foundation. During our education mission, we signed new Memoranda of Understanding with the University of Westminster and the University of Roehampton. And we signed an additional Exchange Agreement with Richmond American International University London, supporting student and staff mobility.

But equally important are the high-level negotiations now underway. We held substantive meetings with City St George's University of London, London Metropolitan University, the University of Southampton, Southampton Solent University and its world-renowned Warsash Maritime Academy, University College London, and Sommet Education, the parent institution of Glion Institute of Higher Education and Les Roches.

These are globally respected institutions, including some of the top-ranked universities in the United Kingdom and the world. And these partnerships are designed to create structured pathways where Virgin Islands students complete their associate degree at HLSCC and enter these universities directly into their third year. Reducing cost. Reducing time. And expanding opportunity.

And while we will continue to expand bachelor's degrees here at home in critical areas, we are also clear-eyed about our reality as a small jurisdiction. We must build excellence locally. And build partnerships globally. Because these partnerships ensure that Virgin Islanders have access to the highest levels of opportunity while we continue strengthening our own national institution.

These partnerships are not aspirational. They are active. They are strategic. And they are already opening doors. Because the goal is simple: our students begin here. They advance there. And they return home ready to build the Virgin Islands. We are building bridges that carry them forward and bring them back stronger.

HLSCC is not simply growing. It is transforming. And it is helping to build the future of these Virgin Islands.

Ladies and gentlemen, recently, we travelled to Finland, a country that is recognized as having one of the strongest education systems in the world. But what struck us most was not where Finland is today. It was where Finland came from.

Because just a few decades ago, Finland made a deliberate decision that the future of their nation would be built through education. They invested in their teachers. They modernized their schools. They aligned education with national development. And over time, education transformed their country. Their economy grew. Their people prospered. Their nation advanced. Not by accident. But by design.

And what that reminded us is something deeply important. We do not have to reinvent the wheel. There are nations that have used education to transform their future. And we have both the responsibility and the opportunity to learn from them. To build relationships with them. And to scale what works to fit our Virgin Islands context.

Because our goal is not simply to admire excellence. Our goal is to achieve it. Our goal is to rise to that standard so that the Virgin Islands can become the standard in this region.

This Education Month, under the theme Strong Foundation for a Future-Focused Generation, we celebrate how far we have come. But we also recognize how far we must go. Because this is not the end of the journey. This is the beginning of a new era. An era where education drives national development. An era where students are future-focused and student-led. An era where the Virgin Islands builds its future deliberately. Strategically. And confidently.

Ladies and gentlemen, the future of the Virgin Islands is not somewhere ahead of us. It is sitting in our classrooms today.

And together, we will teach them. We will equip them. We will empower them. And together, we will build them. And when we build them, they will build the Virgin Islands.

May God bless our educators. May God bless our students. And may God continue to bless these beautiful Virgin Islands.

Thank you.

For Additional Information Contact:

Ms. Angelique Lettsome
Information Officer I
Ministry of Education, Youth Affairs and Sports
Telephone: 1-284-468-9448
Email: anlettsome@gov.vg

Additional Documents or Media

- education_month_2026_opening_address_remarks_by_hon_sharie_de_castro.pdf