

Education Expert Challenges V.I. School Officials to Change

by Christopher Stowens

March 21, 2007 -- If there's anyone who can light a fire under and inspire a group of educators, it's renowned education expert Willard R. Daggett.

In a wide-ranging, dynamic and highly entertaining presentation Wednesday at the Divi Carina Bay Resort on St. Croix, Daggett presented solutions for the myriad problems faced by the V.I. education system.

According to Daggett, one of the major hurdles to improvement is the levels of bureaucracies firmly entrenched in the system. With many of those bureaucrats, administrators, superintendents, and commissioners in the audience, Daggett challenged them, "Until you admit that you are a part of the problem, you cannot be part of the solution." The crowd of 150 was an attentive and receptive group that seemed ready to acknowledge that the system is in crisis.

Daggett, the founder of the International Center for Leadership in Education (ICLE), has spoken to hundreds of thousands of educators advocating the necessity for change. "We are in a global economy, and there are other countries that are passing or will pass us in education, technology and economy."

He and the center are involved in research, evaluation and recommendations on a global scale. He is currently one of the key figures working on the reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act, which he strongly supports but indicated is in need of "major tweaking."

He repeatedly stressed that it was crucial that the pressure for change must exceed the amount of resistance to change. "There is one heck of a need here. The system in the Virgin Islands is in crisis," he said. "You need to take a time out and stop what you are doing."

Saying that it was a steep hill to climb, he made a series of suggestions, some of which he said were common sense and others "politically incorrect."

He suggested the adoption of new methods to help assess abilities and target materials specifically to improve individual students, including new educational software applications.

He also advocated having teachers stay with a class for repeated years (known as "looping") and teaching for the "real world" by avoiding irrelevant material and using interdisciplinary techniques to stress reading and math -- in all subjects, everyday.

The St. Croix Foundation, which sponsored Wednesday's symposium, is already trying some of Daggett's ideas. In 2005 the foundation began a comprehensive educational initiative beginning at Elena L Christian Junior High School, which stresses across-the-board literacy in the hopes of producing a model school for the territory.

As the symposium continued, Daggett, a former director of the New York Regents exam, advocated removing unneeded curriculum and making professional development voluntary, not mandatory. Daggett argued that forcing professional development on teachers who will not "learn or change" is a waste of time. "Better to encourage those



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who want to develop and let them pass it on to colleagues,” he said.

Daggett spoke at length about misplaced priorities and emphasis. He maintains that time is wasted teaching things that have no relevance in the real world. Math requirements, he said, far exceed what students can expect to ever use in their lives, and literacy standards are woefully lower than students will need to function in a global economy.

“Would you want someone who could not read the manual to work on the complexities of your new car; or [someone] administer medicine who could not understand the directions?” he asked.

At one point in his six-hour presentation, which was filled with facts and figures, slides, graphics and tables, Daggett showed a 12-second video in order to demonstrate how the younger generation, known as "millennials," takes in information differently from baby boomers and Gen Xers.

The video showed students passing basketballs, and he asked the audience to count the number of passes made by those in white shirts. The correct answer was 15, but the answers in the room ranged from 5 to 26.

He then asked how many had seen the gorilla in the clip. Three people out of 150 said they had, and most of the audience chided them, saying there had been no gorilla. Daggett then showed the clip again, and much to the group’s chagrin, there was a gorilla that walked through the students and stood in the center of the screen.

People were shocked that they had missed it, and Daggett said that most children take it all in -- counting the passes correctly and seeing the gorilla.

Then Daggett drove home his point, “You are missing something just as big in how you view education. The world is changing five times faster than is education. You are boring these kids out of their ever-lovin’ minds.”

It may have been shocking to hear that they were boring, behind the times and not doing their jobs, but the audience absorbed every word he said and responded with a rousing standing ovation.

The challenge remains whether V.I. educators will be able to implement Daggett's suggestions or take advantage of his offer, funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, to use his team of educational experts to help the territory assess the system and make real progress.

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