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HLSCC Fall Convocation 2025 Speech By Honourable Sharie de Castro

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By Honourable Sharie de Castro

Minister for Education, Youth Affairs and Sports

Board of Governors, President Georges, faculty, staff and students, good afternoon.

Standing here today as both Minister for Education and a proud alumna of H. Lavity Stoutt Community College, I am humbled. This institution is not just a place of learning; it is a lens—one that sharpens our vision, expands our horizons, and allows us to see further than we thought possible. And as we gather under the theme *"The Dream of a Visionary,"* I am reminded that every great dream requires clarity of sight, and every clear vision requires investment, courage, and commitment.

When I reflect on our journey, I see how steadily we have been building on the dream. In 2024, the College received a base subvention of $9,018,400. But because the vision was expanding, we invested an additional $900,000—bringing the total to $9,918,400. That mandate was clear: we were to go full steam ahead in expanding opportunities in education. This included beginning the pursuit of accreditation for four-year bachelor's degrees right here on island, starting with education. It also included building the momentum in robotics, coding, and programming—first introduced in our secondary schools—so that HLSCC could carry this vision forward. Additionally, the reintroduction of CAPE was a significant step, creating additional pathways to higher education. The funding also supported the recruitment of additional staff in strategic areas such as education and computer science, as well as fully funded certificate programmes for educators through the Institute of Education—including the Certificate in Teaching, Certificate in Leadership—and additional professional development opportunities to strengthen the Institute of Education.

Already, we are seeing results. The Robotics Club has launched. The IT curriculum is being reviewed and restructured. Classroom spaces are will be redesigned. Additional staff are being hired to support the next wave of innovation. This is what it looks like when vision comes into focus—when a bold idea is translated into

action.

And in 2025, we sharpened that focus even more. The College began with a base budget of $9,618,300. But just a few months ago, through the Supplementary Appropriation, we added $1,315,000. This brings HLSCC's total funding for 2025 to $10,933,300. Every dollar of that additional support is an investment in the dream of a visionary, and an investment in you, our students.

That investment is taking shape in very tangible ways. First, a brand-new student information system—something the College has not had updated in over two decades. This system will transform the way you, as students, engage with the College—from registration to academic progress tracking—aligning HLSCC with modern expectations and preparing it for the future.

Second, we are funding the designs for a dormitory. Student accommodation is essential if this College is to expand its reach, welcome students from across our islands and the region, and truly live out its vision of growth. The dream of a visionary must always include space for others, and dormitories will open doors for more students to join our community.

Third, and dear to my heart, is access. Part of this $1.3 million is supporting scholarships across all nine districts. Of these, three are dedicated to the MPT Progamme - Marine Professional Training Programme—preparing students for vital roles in our maritime economy—and three are dedicated to the NCCER Programme, the National Center for Construction and Education Research Programme—equipping students with the technical skills to build and shape our territory. This expansion of the vision is about ensuring that young people across the Territory have the opportunity to pursue advanced training, earn industry-recognized certification, and step boldly into fields that drive both personal success and the future of these Virgin Islands.

We have also taken an important step in strengthening HLSCC's ability to attract and retain talent. Effective January 4th, 2025, the College increased its average starting faculty salary bands by 35%. This is transformational. It means we can better recruit and retain the best educators—the vision-keepers who sharpen your

focus and guide your journey every single day.

Our vision is not confined to these shores. Earlier this year, HLSCC advanced new partnerships with leading UK universities, giving you, our students, unprecedented opportunities to continue your studies abroad. For the first time, you will be able to transfer into UK universities at year two, significantly reducing both the time and cost to complete your degree.

This was accomplished through the signing of a memorandum of understanding with Richmond American University London, where you can immediately transfer into any of their 35 bachelor's degree programmes. And we are mapping out additional opportunities—such as with the New Model Institute for Technology and Engineering (NMITE), whose revolutionary hands-on approach to engineering mirrors the future-focused, experiential vision we are building here. Through this pathway as well, students will be able to transfer into NMITE beginning at year two, opening doors to programmes such as their pioneering bachelor's in Integrated Engineering and Construction.

Together, these partnerships expand the horizon of possibility—ensuring that your vision as students can extend seamlessly from HLSCC into the global classroom.

And finally, I must speak about how we are reshaping the final year of secondary school to prepare students for what lies ahead. The Ministry, in partnership with HLSCC, has introduced the Matriculation and Advancement through Dual Enrolment (MA:DE) Programme. Historically, this programme now provides four structured pathways for dual enrolment at the College, giving secondary school students access to college-level courses, technical training, and career exploration opportunities before they even graduate high school.

Through MA:DE, secondary school students can earn college credits, build skills in technical and maritime fields, and even participate in hands-on internships with industry partners. Performance in these courses will carry greater weight in the GPA, rewarding the extra effort required for college-level work. For students, this means a stronger start to higher education, more confidence stepping into the workplace, and a head start on building the future envisioned for themselves.

This is what the dream of a visionary looks like. It is not abstract. It is concrete. It is scholarships in your hands, classrooms filled with technology, faculty who are fairly compensated, dormitories rising from the ground, transfer agreements, and opportunities that begin even before you finish high school.

I also want to take a moment to acknowledge the incredible leadership of HLSCC's **Board of Governors**, and of course, the College's **President, Dr. Richard Georges**, who was my **former English lecturer at HLSCC**. To stand here today as Minister for Education, and see him as President of the College, is profoundly meaningful. Both of us began our journeys as students at HLSCC, and look at where we are now—proof of the transformative power of this institution, and a testament to the dreams it nurtures. To the students here today, we are certain that you will do major things as well. I also extend heartfelt thanks to the **faculty and staff**, whose dedication makes all of this possible.

As we reflect on all that has been achieved, I believe that Hon. H. Lavity Stoutt—the visionary—would be proud of the strides we are making at HLSCC. Yet, we know there is more work to be done. As I often say, *"You can't get change if we give exact, but if you give more, you get change."* And that is precisely what we will continue to do—give more, invest more, and expand opportunities so that the dream of a visionary continues to inspire generations of students. Today, we pay tribute to his legacy, and we commit to carrying forward his vision with boldness, dedication, and unwavering purpose.

Board of Governors, President, faculty, staff, students and community—this College is proof that when vision is clear, when sight is sharpened, and when commitment is strong, the dream of a visionary becomes the reality of a generation.

Thank you, and I wish you all a successful academic year.