GOVERNMENT OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

STATEMENT

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Offical Statement by the Minister for Education, Youth Affairs and Sports on the Opening of the Eslyn Henley Richiez Learning Centre

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Good morning, Virgin Islands. From rubble to rebirth — that is the story of the Eslyn Henley Richiez Learning Centre. In 2017, the winds roared and the walls fell. Chaos swept across our islands, tearing away not only buildings but, for a time, our sense of normalcy. Yet even in the midst of destruction, there flickered something divine — a determination, a dream, a design for renewal. Out of the chaos came clarity. Out of the ruin came resolve. And today, out of that rubble, rises this rebirth — the new Eslyn Henley Richiez Learning Centre, the proud home of the Grizzlies, and the first purpose-built special education facility of its kind in the entire OECS region.

When the storms stripped us bare, they also gave us something sacred: the opportunity to begin again — intentionally. To not just rebuild what was, but to reimagine what could be. This school stands as the embodiment of that reimagining. Every beam, every brick, every design decision was deliberate. We did not simply reconstruct; we redesigned. We did not simply reopen; we rebirthed.

This is a structure born of purpose — intentionally crafted to meet the diverse, dynamic needs of our exceptional learners. Here, architecture meets empathy. Here, space itself speaks the language of inclusion — with sensory rooms, therapeutic spaces, accessibility features, and technology designed to meet every learner where they are. This is not just a school; this is a statement. That in the Virgin Islands, every child matters, every mind belongs, and every ability has value.

But rebirth is not only about the building that surrounds us. It is about the spirit that fills it. As we raised this structure from the ground up, we also began rebuilding the human framework of special education in these Virgin Islands. Across the territory, we now have eighteen special education teachers and over 20 learning support assistants, each one a pillar of patience and professionalism.

And to strengthen the network of support around them, we have created new positions — a behavioural specialist, an occupational therapist, a school nurse, and an education assessment specialist — each intentionally designed to support not only the Eslyn Henley Richiez Learning Centre but every exceptional student across the Virgin Islands. This is the careful construction of capacity — teacher by teacher, therapist by therapist, role by role — ensuring that this rebirth is sustainable, that

it is supported, that it can stand the test of time.

I also want to acknowledge the team at the Ministry of Education — the engineers of policy, the builders of opportunity, the steady hands behind the scaffolding of progress.
And among them, I must especially highlight Mrs. Afiya Smith, our Education Officer for Exceptional Education, who continues to drive this vision forward — helping to spearhead the growth, the structure, and the soul of exceptional education in our Virgin Islands.

Before I go further, I ask that we take a brief moment of silence to remember our colleague, Mr. Jamal Jones, our former Finance and Planning Officer, who so generously gave of himself – driving the bus each morning during the school's relocation, ensuring that our students could safely continue their education. May his service and commitment forever be remembered.

Yesterday, October 12th, marked fifty-three years since this vision was first built — when, in 1972, the BVI Branch of the British Red Cross Society opened the Fort Charlotte Children's Centre. And so, today is a fitting day for the reopening — a day that bridges our past and our future, honouring the foundation that was laid while embracing the new chapter that begins. In 1972, at its helm stood Miss Eslyn Henley — a woman of vision and heart, the first principal, the builder of a brave beginning.

Today, as we open this new home that bears her name — eight years after the devastation of 2017 — we are reminded that eight symbolizes new beginnings. And so this moment stands as both a tribute and a turning point: honouring where we began, and embracing what we are becoming. This is more than a new building; it is the continuation of a legacy — rebuilt, reborn, and reimagined.

To our students — our Grizzlies — you are the heartbeat of this rebirth. This school was built for you. Every room was designed with you in mind. You are not defined by limits; you are defined by limitless potential. And so, we will continue to build for you and with you — to give you the skills, the support, and the confidence to step into the world ready to live fully, to work proudly, to stand independently. You are the living proof that from challenge can come strength, from difference can come

brilliance, and from rubble can rise remarkable things.

To the principal and teachers of the Eslyn Henley Richiez Learning Centre — it takes a special kind of patience, a sacred kind of passion, to do what you do each day. You are nurturers, advocates, architects of hope. You take the hands of our children and guide them gently but firmly toward their fullest potential. For every moment you spend adapting lessons, for every small victory you celebrate, for every ounce of compassion you pour into this place — thank you. Thank you for answering the call. Thank you for standing at the front lines of transformation. Thank you for being the steady heartbeat of this rebirth.

To the parents and families — your patience has been tested, your perseverance has been proven. For eight long years, you waited, you advocated, you pushed for progress. You did not only help to build this building — you helped to build a system. A system that listens, that learns, that loves your children as deeply as you do. Your advocacy lit the path that brought us here today.
Thank you for believing, for standing firm, and for reminding us that partnership with parents is the cornerstone of progress.

As Minister for Education, I stand proudly on behalf of the Government and people of the Virgin Islands — because this moment is ours. We made a conscious decision to reinvest — to see education not as an expense, but as an enduring investment in the soul of our society. Through our collective effort and commitment, we have reaffirmed our belief in building not just schools, but futures; not just infrastructure, but impact. This is reinvestment. This is renewal. This is our resolve — the resolve of a government and a people who understand the value of investing in our most exceptional learners.

I also wish to acknowledge our partners in this remarkable project — the Virgin Islands Recovery and Development Agency, for their partnership and expert project management; the architect TigerQi Architecture, for brilliance in design; and the contractor Autland Heavy Equipment Co. Ltd, for bringing our vision to reality and building a world-class facility.

From concept to construction, each of you played a vital role in ensuring that this school would not only be functional, but exceptional — a place that will serve

generations of exceptional students with dignity and pride. Your collaboration has turned our collective vision into something tangible, something timeless — a true symbol of what can be achieved when dedication meets design.

And to our partners for progress in education, Unite BVI and Maples Group, thank you for your generosity in supporting the furnishing of this school. Your contribution has helped transform this building from a structure into a home — a place where learning and love will coexist for years to come. And to the Association of Reef Keepers who led the mandate alongside inmates from His Majesty's Prisons and other valued volunteers in creating the beautiful sensory rain garden we see here today.

So, as we open these doors, let us understand the magnitude of this moment. This is not just the rebirth of a school — this is the rebirth of special education in the Virgin Islands. We have rethought, redesigned, and recommitted ourselves to building a system that caters to every child — a system that sees every learner not as an exception, but as an essential part of our educational landscape. This rebirth represents more than restoration. It represents renaissance — a reawakening of our collective will to create an education system that is inclusive, innovative, and inspired.

And so, my friends, as we cut this ribbon and step inside this magnificent home of learning, may we remember what it took to get here. From rubble — resilience. From storms — strength. From loss — light. From devastation — determination. And from ruin — rebirth. The Eslyn Henley Richiez Learning Centre stands today as a living testament to what we can build when our vision is clear and our hearts are committed. May it forever remind us that even when the winds of adversity blow, we in the Virgin Islands will always find the courage — to rebuild, to reimagine, and to be reborn.

Thank you.

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Additional Documents or Media

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