

TEENTIMES

FOR THE YOUTH, BY THE YOUTH!

JANUARY 2026



OUR WANTS AND HOPES FOR 2026

PAGES 8 & 9

Would You Have Been Able to Pass?

BY ASANTÉ PHILIPPS

Every year when the latest exam results are released for Milton Peters College, many people focus on one number, the low passing rate. Soon after, comments begin to spread on social media and in the community. Some people laugh. Others blame the students. A few even claim the school is failing. But behind those numbers are real students, teenagers who worked hard, felt stress, and gave their best in one of the most demanding school systems in the country.

Milton Peters College is known for low academic success rates, largely because of strict, often hard-to-meet requirements. To pass a subject, students must meet tight standards and show deep understanding of the material. Exams are not simply about memorising facts, they require students to explain ideas, solve complex problems, and think critical-



ly under pressure. For many students, each exam feels like a mountain to climb.

To the older public of St. Maarten, let's be frank: it is easy to sit back and ridicule these results. Educating yourselves about what students are facing is even easier. Yet instead of standing up for young people battling through a tough system, too many choose to mock them alongside the very system that is weighing them down.

After exam periods end, the results are published in newspapers and across social media. Officials who represent our island see the same low rates, yet students continue to suffer under requirements that many describe as unreasonable. For example, some students say they received a question on a history exam, written in Curaçao, asking about a street in Curaçao, a place they do not live. Others say

they were asked about a statue at a high school in Curaçao, a school they do not attend. The community sees these complaints, but instead of pushing for change, the easiest response seems to be ridicule, aimed at students who want nothing more than a fair education.

line making jokes about their results, it cuts deep.

"It makes you feel small," another student said. "Like people think we're stupid. But they don't know how hard our exam requirements really are."

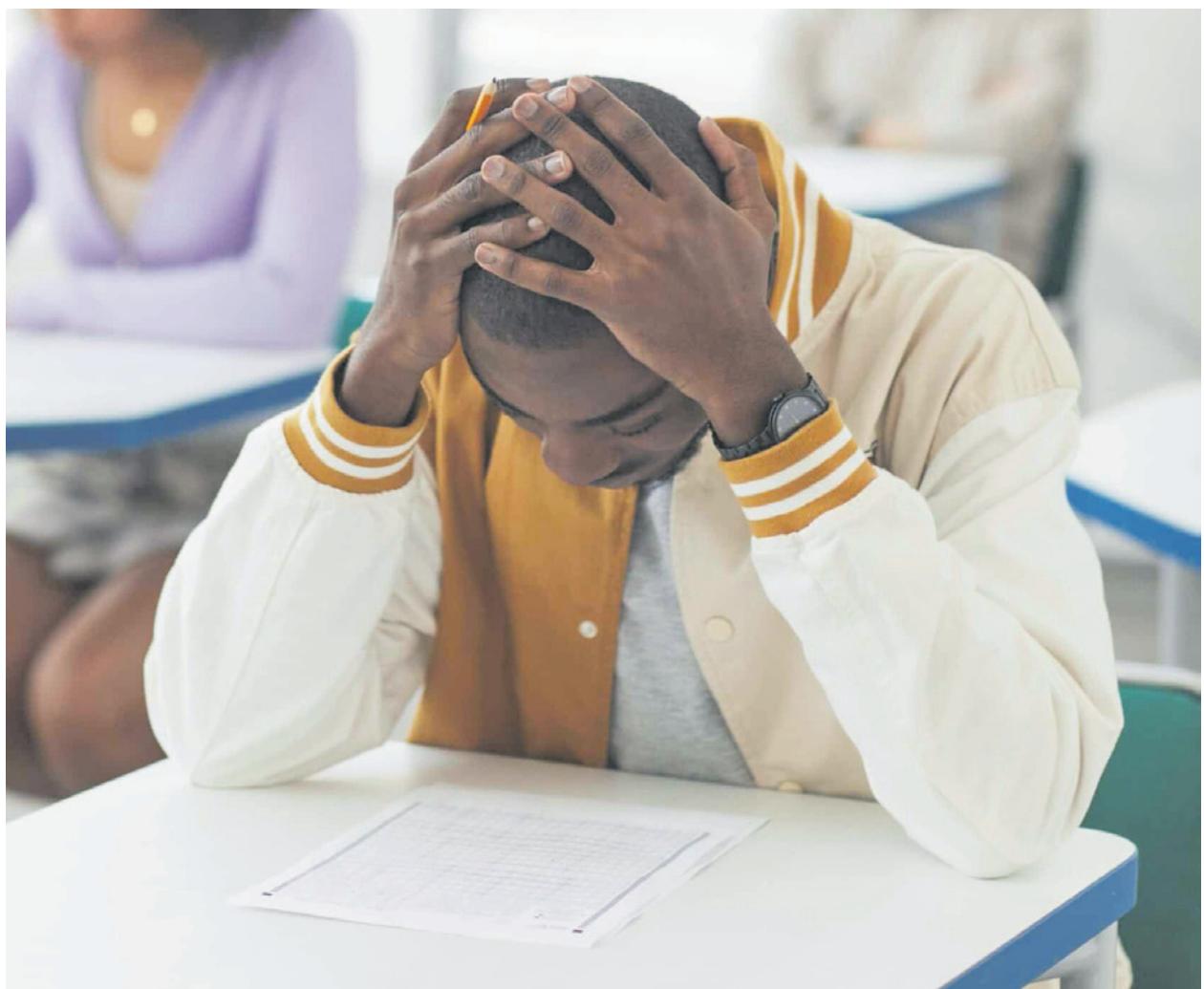
That is what people should understand before judging. A low pass rate does not automatically mean poor teaching or lazy students. Sometimes, it means the requirements demand more from students than most other systems do, with little consideration for context.

"I studied every night," one student said. "I missed out on hanging out with my friends and even skipped family events just to keep up, only to be held back a year because I was missing 0.1 points to pass. When I didn't pass, it felt like all that hard work didn't matter."

Imagine that: repeating an entire school year because you fell short by a fraction of a point, closer to zero than to one.

Stories like this are common among Milton Peters College students. Many wake up early to study before class. They carry heavy backpacks, not just filled with books, but with pressure and fear of failing. When they see people on

As the community talks about these results, it is important to remember the faces behind the scores. These are young people who care about their future. They do not deserve to be laughed at or looked down on. Instead of judging, the community should take the time to understand the reasons behind the low pass rate. Then, the next time you feel tempted to criticize, ask yourself honestly: would I have been able to pass under these conditions?



TEENTIMES
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is a publication of

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DIVING FOR GOLD: Azaiah Duzon is already thinking like a competitor

Some young athletes talk about winning, others talk about effort. Eleven-year-old Azaiah Duzon talks about time, endurance, and preparation. He is proud of medals, but what matters most to him is improving, learning what big meets feel like, and showing up to training even when school pressure is real.

Azaiah attends Asha Steven's Hillside Christian School and balances an exam year with a demanding swim schedule. Outside the pool, he keeps his mind active with chess, gaming, and traveling, but swimming is his "calming point", the place where nerves settle and focus takes over.

From diplomas to the Dolphin Swim Team

Azaiah's path into competitive swimming started at Belair with Franky Swim School, where he was working on earning his diplomas. When he was asked if he wanted to join a team, he did not hesitate. He joined the Dolphin Swim Team under Coach Dwight, and has been training with the team since January 2024.

That decision quickly turned into routine and responsi-

bility. Azaiah trains five to six times a week, with his schedule carefully managed at home to make sure school and swimming stay balanced. He describes himself as a breaststroke sprinter, with training that stays specific to his strengths while still building the overall base he needs to improve.

Carifta 2025, nerves and lessons

In 2025, Azaiah travelled to Trinidad for the Carifta Swim Championships and got a first taste of what regional competition feels like. He made finals twice, in the 50m and 100m breaststroke, placing 5th and 7th.

He admits it was challenging and intense, with nerves "going crazy", and he said he did not fully know what he was getting into. Still, he leaned on the preparation from his coach and focused on doing his best. Beyond the races, he enjoyed the experience of traveling with teammates and meeting swimmers from other countries, including teams from Grenada and Turks and Caicos. The biggest takeaway, he said, is that now he understands what to expect and what

he needs to prepare for next year.

Big results in Aruba

Azaiah's most recent competition was in Aruba, and it came with a clear purpose: he needed to race in a 50m pool to achieve qualifying times for Carifta 2026. Competing in a long-course meet, he raced under the supervision of Coach Jordy of Aruba Giants, after Coach Dwight asked him to guide Azaiah through his heats.

The results were strong. Azaiah finished with four gold medals in:

- * 50m butterfly
- * 50m breaststroke
- * 100m breaststroke
- * 50m freestyle

He also earned two silver medals in:

- * 100m freestyle
- * 200m freestyle

Azaiah said it felt great to finish the meet that way, especially while mainly competing against an Aruban rival he identified as Neymar. He also noted the timing, coming off Christmas and being in "taper" mode rather than heavy training, made him even happier with the outcome. For him, it was less about the medals and more about improving



his times and building endurance.

but he believes it is going well.

What comes next

After Aruba, Azaiah's focus is shifting. He wants to build endurance as training gets harder and competition gets sharper. He mentioned training alongside Nigel and Emmabriel, pushing each other in practice and learning how to stay focused under pressure. With exam year in full swing, he says balancing studying and training is the hardest part,

Asked what advice he would give peers who want to swim, Azaiah kept it simple: put in the work, go for what you want, do not give up, and do not doubt yourself, even when you feel ready to stop.

Gratitude behind the grind

Azaiah also made sure to recognise the people around him. He thanked his coach for pushing him not to quit, and his mom, family, and sponsor for supporting him along the way.

At 11, Azaiah Duzon is already building habits that many athletes take years to develop: consistency, self-awareness, and a clear sense of what the next level demands. The medals are shining now, but the mindset is what suggests there is more to come.



Feature



WHERE HER HEART DANCES: SASHA BROOKS ON WHY DANCE KEEPS HER GROUNDED

Some teens find their thing early, then spend years figuring out how to hold onto it while school, pressure, and life start moving faster. For Sasha Brooks, a 16-year-old fifth form student at St. Dominic High School, that “thing” is dance. She enjoys reading, watching anime, and expressing herself through movement, but dance is the constant that keeps pulling her back, even when she has tried to step away.

“Dance has been a big part of my life for as long as I can remember,” Sasha says. “It plays a huge role in who I am today.”

It started with her mom, and it stuck

Sasha’s dance journey began before she was old enough to understand what it would become. When her mother found out she was having a girl, she already knew she wanted to put her into dance. Sasha took her very first class at three years old, and from that moment, dance became part of her identity.

The truth is, she quit more than once

One thing people may not know about Sasha is that she has quit dance a couple of times. Not because she stopped loving it, but because life can get heavy, and motivation can disappear, even for things you care about deeply.

Each time, she found herself returning. “Dance makes my soul happy,” she says. “Whenever I stop dancing, I feel lost and ungrounded.”

For Sasha, dance is not only about performances. It is about feeling steady in her own body and mind.

The people behind the dancer

Sasha is quick to name the people who keep her going. Her biggest supporters are her parents. She is also grateful for her dance teachers and the dance moms at the studio, who encourage her and remind her that she belongs in the space she is working so hard to grow in.

Inspiration that feels like art

When Sasha talks about inspiration, she points to Miss Indhira. “She is someone I will always look up to,” Sasha says. “She is an incredible dancer with the most graceful movement, and she evokes so much emotion when she dances that she leaves everyone wanting more.”

What Sasha admires most is not only the technique, but the emotion, the way dance can tell a story without words.

The hardest part: comparison

For Sasha, one of the toughest challenges is comparison. Dancers are always trying to improve, always watching others, always aiming higher. That can push you forward, but it can also make you

feel like you are not progressing fast enough.

Sasha has learned to value smaller wins. “Even small improvements are still progress,” she says. “And they matter.”

Dance in her future, for as long as she can

Sasha hopes to keep dance in her life for as long as possible. With school, responsibilities, and the pace of daily life, she says dance keeps her grounded and helps her handle the noise that can come with growing up.

A dream stage in Russia

If Sasha could dance anywhere in the world, she would choose Russia, specifically the Vaganova Ballet Academy. It is a goal that reflects

how serious she is about dance and how far she is willing to dream.

A message to ECYS: keep investing in the arts

Asked what advice she would give to the Minister of Education, Culture, Youth and Sport (ECYS), Sasha encouraged continued support and investment in the arts, especially dance. For her, dance is not just a hobby, it is discipline, confidence, emotional release, and a positive outlet for young people.

Sasha Brooks is clear about what dance gives her: grounding, joy, and a way to express what she cannot always say out loud. It is where her feet move, yes, but more than that, it is where she feels like herself.

All That Jazz: Savannah Ortega Is Dancing Into Her Next Chapter

Some dancers learn their first steps in a studio; others start long before the first class. For 17-year-old Savannah Ortega, the spark came early, and it came loud. She was not the child who needed convincing, she was the one doing the convincing. By the time she was three, Savannah was already in dance class, and if you ask her mother, the push started even earlier. Savannah laughs and gives some of the credit to a childhood favourite, "Angelina Ballerina", the TV show that helped turn fascination into determination.

Today, Savannah describes herself as an aspiring recreational therapist and performer, a young woman with one foot grounded in service and the other in the spotlight. It is a balance that shows up in how she talks about dance, not just as performance, but as connection, community, and purpose.

Savannah has grown into jazz as her favourite style, thanks in large part to one of the teachers who shaped her path. While she says she values all of her instructors, she points to Susha Hein as the person who introduced her to jazz and helped it become the style she loves most. It is the kind of influence that sticks, the kind that turns training into identity.

Outside the studio, Savannah stays busy with other interests too. She is involved in Interact Club and Choir Club at Learning Unlimited, spaces that feed her social side and keep her engaged beyond dance. Still, it is clear where she feels most at home. Savannah calls the dance school "one of my homes", a place where she feels love and support, and right now she is trying to take it all in.

Her main goal for this year is simple, and it carries weight: spend as much time at dance as possible in these final months as an INDISU Dance Theater of St. Maarten company member and a teacher's assistant. It is not just about perfecting routines, it is about closing a chapter with intention, appreciating the place and people that helped shape her.



When Savannah talks about expression, she does not focus first on technique. She talks about her face. To her, the face is the storyteller, whether the piece is joyful or heavy. It is where the emotion lives, and where the audience can meet her. She wants people to feel what she feels while dancing, and she wants to be remembered for giving everything on stage, every single time.

That same commitment shows up in the moments that mean the most to her, moments that happen away from the studio. Savannah says one of the happiest, most confidence-building experiences is

hearing a child spot her in public and say, "Mommy look it's teacher Savannah," before running up for a hug. For her, it is reassurance that she is making a positive impact in a young child's life. It is also a glimpse of who she is becoming: not only a performer, but a mentor.

Savannah's message to the Minister of Education, Culture, Youth and Sport (ECYS) is direct. She wants more effort put into the arts, and more opportunities for children to showcase their talents to the wider community of St. Maarten. She is not asking for the arts to be treated like an ex-

tra. She is asking for them to be treated like a real pathway, one that builds confidence, discipline, and belonging.

Savannah Ortega is in that in-between space many young performers recognise: old enough to understand what a place means to you, young enough to still be building the future. She is dancing through her last months at INDISU with gratitude and urgency, and she is doing it with a clear point of view. Give the arts room, give children a stage, and watch what happens when talent meets support.

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CARIBBEAN STUDENTS FACING A DUTCH WINTER

For students from St. Maarten and across the Caribbean, moving to the Netherlands is not only a big academic step, it is also a major climate shock. Back home, sunshine is normal, shorts are easy, and you can step outside without thinking twice. In the Netherlands, winter can flip that routine overnight: dark afternoons, icy sidewalks, heavy snowfall, and a cold that makes even simple errands feel like a task. For many Caribbean students, the first winter is not just about learning to dress differently, it is about learning how to cope.

One Caribbean student said they arrived with one clear dream: seeing snow for the first time. "Before coming to the Netherlands, I really wanted to see snow and had high expectations," the student shared. At the same time, they heard the warnings. People around them kept saying not to expect too much because it hardly snows there.

So, when the snow actually came,

it hit differently. "I felt like a child again," the student said. "I was super excited and went outside to play in the snow. It was a very special and unforgettable experience for me." For a moment, winter felt magical, like something out of a movie.

But once that excitement settles, the season brings challenges that are less cute and more real.

The motivation drop is real

The hardest part so far, the student said, is the lack of motivation to step outside. Winter changes how you move through your day. The cold can make you want to stay indoors, and the darkness can make everything feel slower and heavier.

They also shared a practical issue that many Caribbean students can relate to: not being fully prepared. "I don't have proper winter boots," the student said, explaining that every trip outside means walking carefully to avoid slipping. It is the kind of detail that

sounds small until you live it. Ice turns normal streets into hazards, and something as simple as getting to class can feel stressful.

School and travel can change overnight

Winter is not only about cold; it can affect schedules too. The student explained that heavy snowfall led to school being cancelled for a week, with classes moved online. Travel also became more difficult because of weather conditions.

For students already trying to adapt to a new country, new systems, and new expectations, winter disruptions add another layer. You might have a routine one day and then wake up to a world where trains, buses, and school plans shift because the weather is in charge.

Tired, lazy, and less motivated

When asked if winter affects energy, the student did not hesitate. "Yes," they said. "The weather makes me feel very tired, lazy,

and less motivated than usual."

That tired feeling is not only physical. Winter can also change mood, and the student said the lack of sunlight affects them a lot. "I feel very irritated when I don't see the sun," they shared. Growing up in the Caribbean where the sun shines almost daily and then switching to a season with long stretches of grey skies can feel like losing something that used to keep you balanced.

Homesickness hits harder in winter

Winter can make homesickness louder. The student admitted they have been feeling more emotional lately, especially during the winter months. What they miss most is simple, but powerful: the sun, the beach, and the freedom to wear shorts whenever they go out.

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It is not only about missing warmth. It is missing the feeling of ease, the familiar rhythm, the outdoor lifestyle, the natural light, the way home can feel open compared to the closed-in feeling winter can bring.

How they stay positive

Even with the challenges, the student has found ways to keep their head up. They try to stay connected with family back home, spend time with friends, and remind themselves that winter is temporary and will pass.

That reminder matters, because when you are in the middle of it, winter can feel endless. But it is a season, not a permanent situation.

Advice for other Caribbean students

For other Caribbean students planning to move to the Netherlands, the student's advice is practical and honest: prepare yourself mentally and physically. Invest in good winter clothing, especially a warm jacket and proper winter boots. Create a routine, stay active, and do not isolate yourself. Stay connected to loved ones, and find comfort in familiar activities that make you feel like yourself.

Most importantly, the student said to be patient with yourself. Adjusting from Caribbean life to a cold, dark winter takes time.

For Caribbean students, the Dutch winter can be a mix of first-time wonder and real struggle. Snow might be exciting, but learning how to live through the season is its own kind of lesson, one that teaches resilience, preparation, and how to find light even when the sky is grey.



Feature

WHAT ST. MAARTEN'S YOUTH WANT IN 2026

When adults talk about “the future”, they often mean plans, policies, and long speeches that do not reach the average teen's daily life. St. Maarten's young people are not asking for perfection in 2026, but we are asking to be taken seriously as people who live here too. We want a country that prepares us for the modern world, understands why youth struggle, supports our families, and gives us real, safe ways to grow. We want leaders to stop guessing what teens need, and start listening.

A lot of youth wishes for 2026 come down to one idea: life is moving fast, but our systems still move like it is 1999. School, work, laws, and public spaces need to match the reality we live in now.

An education system that understands the modern world

Students in St. Maarten want an education system that prepares us for real life, not just for passing tests. We are living in a world of Artificial Intelligence (AI), online work, digital skills, fast-changing careers, and global competition. Too many students still feel like school is focused on memorising information instead of building the skills we actually need: critical thinking, communication, problem-solving, digital literacy, financial basics, and career exploration.

A modern education system should teach practical things without making them “extra.” Teens want courses that help us understand money, taxes, saving, entrepreneurship, digital marketing, coding basics, online safety, and how to apply for scholarships, internships, and jobs. We want guidance that shows multiple paths to success, university, vocational routes, trades, creative careers, hospitality management, tech,



healthcare, and business. Some students are strong academically, others learn best through hands-on training, and both deserve respect.

Students also want schools to feel relevant. Lessons should connect to local reality: St. Maarten's history, economy, environment, and future opportunities. More field trips, more guest speakers from real industries, more partnerships with businesses, more career days that do not feel like a formality. If we are being prepared to lead this country, then we should understand how it works.

Shorter school days and less pressure

Students are tired. That does not mean we are lazy; it means the pressure is constant and the school day often feels too long for how much real learning actually happens. Many teens want shorter school days, not because we want to do nothing, but because we want time to recover, study properly, develop hobbies, work part-time, and still have a life.

A shorter school day could still be effective if the time were used more efficiently. Teachers and students both know that after a certain point, attention drops. Longer hours do not automatically mean better results. A smarter schedule with focused learning blocks, structured study periods, and time for support classes could reduce burnout and improve performance.

When teens are under pressure every day, mental health suffers. Students want less of the “push through it” mindset and more support that is normal, not embarrassing. Counselling services should be stronger, easier to access, and treated as part of student success, not as a last resort.



Leaders must understand juvenile delinquency, not just punish it

Youth in St. Maarten want leaders to stop acting surprised about juvenile delinquency. When teens get in trouble, the public conversation often jumps straight to punishment, as if bad behaviour comes from nowhere. Most young people know the truth: delinquency has roots. Boredom, lack of structure, unstable homes, trauma, poverty, untreated mental health issues, learning struggles, addiction in the household, and peer pressure all play a role.

If leaders want change, they have to deal with the reasons. Youth programmes cannot be seasonal photo-ops. Schools need support systems for struggling students, not just discipline. Communities need mentorship programmes, after-school centres, and safe spaces where teens can go without being judged. Parents need support too, because a stressed home often produces stressed children.

We also want rehabilitation to be real. Teens who mess up should have clear ways to repair harm and rebuild, through counselling, community service, skills training, and mentorship.



When society labels a young person as "bad," it can push them deeper into the same behaviour. When society gives structure and a second chance, it creates a different outcome.

A better economic situation for our parents

Teenagers feel the economy even when we do not pay bills. When parents are stressed, children feel it in the home, in what we cannot afford, and in the tension that follows financial pressure. Youth in 2026 want a stronger economy that helps families breathe.

We want leaders to focus on cost of living, stable jobs, and fair wages. We want the country to reduce the everyday struggle that makes normal life feel like survival. When parents are working two jobs and still cannot catch up, young people lose time with family, and some teens feel forced to grow up too fast.

A better economy is not only about tourism. Youth want more opportunities that match the modern world: tech training, small business support, creative industries, sports development, and sustainable industries that help St. Maarten become less dependent on one sector. We want internships that actually lead somewhere, and entry-level jobs that train young people properly instead of treating us like disposable labour.

Entertainment that is planned, varied, and for more than one type of teen

Teens want things to do. That sounds simple, but it matters. Boredom is not just boredom, it can turn into trouble, anxiety, and risky behaviour. St. Maarten's youth want more planned entertainment that is safe, affordable, and consistent, not only during Carnival or special weekends.

Not every teen wants a science fair, a spelling bee, or a speech competition. Those activities

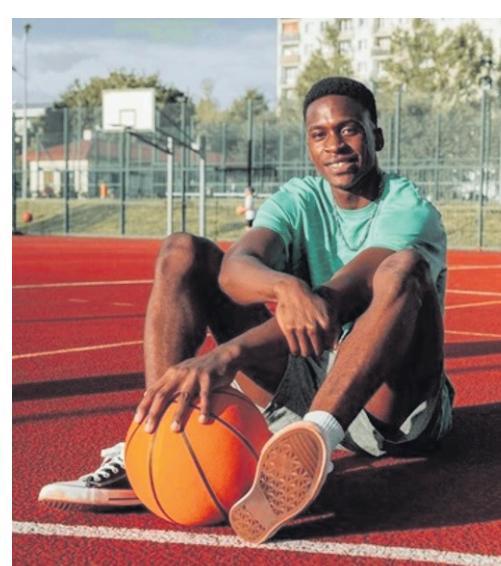


are fine, but they cannot be the only "youth development" options. Some teens want music showcases, dance battles, open mic nights, art exhibits, gaming tournaments, coding hackathons, sports leagues, talent nights, fashion showcases, beach cleanups with music afterward, stuff like that.

We want events that reflect real youth culture, planned with youth at the table. We also want spaces to gather that are not treated like a problem. If teens have no safe places to go, they will end up in unsafe places, and then society will blame them for being there.

Respect for arts, sports, and different talents

Youth in 2026 want St. Maarten to stop treating arts and sports like hobbies that do not matter. Dance, music, theatre, visual arts, and athletics build discipline, confidence, teamwork, and identity. They also create careers. Plenty of young people are gifted in ways that do not show up on a math test, and they deserve investment too.



We want better sports facilities, more structured leagues, and more support for coaches and youth clubs. We want arts education that is consistent, not occasional. We want scholarships and training opportunities that recognise creative and athletic talent alongside academics.

What youth are really asking for

St. Maarten's teens are not asking leaders to "save" us. We are asking for systems that make sense. We are asking for schools to prepare us for the world we actually live in, with less burnout and better support. We are asking leaders to understand juvenile delinquency as a symptom of deeper issues, not as a personality trait. We are asking for an economy that lets parents breathe, because stable homes create stable young people. We are asking for entertainment and development opportunities that reflect who we are, not who adults assume we should be. If 2026 is going to feel different, then youth voices cannot be an afterthought. We are here now, we are paying attention, and we are ready for St. Maarten to meet us halfway.



Feature

Constitutional Autonomy

BY JOSHUA ALEXANDER

Following the 2025 Governor's Symposium, held under the theme "15 Years of Constitutional Autonomy: Achievements, Lessons and Prospects," His Excellency Governor Ajamu G. Baly met with the top finalists of the Youth Creative Vision Contest at the Cabinet of the Governor in Harbour View on December 19, 2025. The contest invited students to share their vision for St. Maarten's future through creative submissions. First place went to Joshua Alexander of Learning Unlimited Preparatory School for his essay, "Constitutional Autonomy."

This is his piece:

A strong three-legged stool needs three strong legs to stand on: for Sint Maarten, true and lasting stability can only be reached by simultaneously strengthening the legs of effective governance, economic diversification, and a vibrant, healthy society.

Effective governance forms the first crucial leg because it is the institution that legislates and enforces the laws that promote societal unity and protect citizens' rights. Though its role is almost entirely legislative, it assumes the



monumental task of coordinating the aid for the people during the crisis period, providing essential services, coordinating the disaster relief, and delivering foreign assistance. The destruction caused by Hurricane Irma in 2017 is a good example of the situation. Right after the storm, an effective government was the most critical component for Sint Maarten to operate as a stand-alone government in sanctioning the World Bank Trust Fund Agreement with the Netherlands. This multi-angular pact, which regulated the disbursement of funds for reconstruction summing up to euros in the hundreds of millions, required a body to govern, which would pass the laws that were required, see to the financial aspect, and oversee the execution of the works. Without such an authority

to make such legal rulings and provide checks and balances, the island could not have gained access to the needed funds and developed the recovery plan well, thus establishing that good governance is the key to both internal stability and foreign affairs.

Economic diversification constitutes the second vital leg, addressing the island's most pressing vulnerability. Sint Maarten's economy, heavily reliant on tourism, remains dangerously susceptible to external shocks like hurricanes, pandemics, or global recessions. This dependence constrains essential projects, from airport reconstruction and road repairs to modernising the unstable electricity grid, which is all limited by available funding. Diversifying into new sectors such as technology, sustainable industries, or financial services is not merely beneficial but essential for survival. Economic resilience forms the foundation for social development and reduces dependence on external aid.

The third and final leg, most worthy to be emphasised, is the building of a healthy and communal society and the establishment of its pride and national identity. One of them is simply the government hosting an earnest "St. Maarten Day Festi-

val" each year, which is no longer only a festival but also includes regional cultural institutions participating. With local ingredients as the focus of traditional cooking contests, an active parade with both the Dutch and French sides' traditional practices, and folk music and dance sessions, the festival would be a carefully planned celebration of the island's unique heritage. It would promote the participation of all ages, thus promoting the restoration of community pride and strengthening interpersonal relations among the people in the community.

These three elements are interconnected like threads in a tapestry: governance provides structure, economic diversification adds resilience, and cultural cohesion creates identity. By investing equally in all three pillars, Sint Maarten can move beyond vulnerability toward self-reliance, stability, and collective pride, ensuring a prosperous future for all its citizens.

Joshua Alexander
Learning Unlimited
Preparatory School
Constitutional Autonomy Essay

The Future of St. Maarten

BY TERRIANN BUCKLEY

As part of the Youth Creative Vision Contest connected to the 2025 Governor's Symposium theme, "15 Years of Constitutional Autonomy: Achievements, Lessons and Prospects," students were invited to present their ideas for St. Maarten's future in essays, poems, videos, or songs. On December 19, 2025, Governor Ajamu G. Baly welcomed the winner and finalists to an informal meeting at the Cabinet of the Governor in Harbour View. Terriann Buckley of the St. Maarten Academy Vocational Business Campus earned second place for her essay, "The

Future of St. Maarten."

This is her piece:

The island of St. Maarten is a gem in the Caribbean, blessed with beautiful beaches, vibrant culture, and resilient people. However, as we look to the future, it is essential to plan for progress that benefits all residents and ensures our island continues to thrive for generations to come. I believe that St. Maarten lies in economic independence, modern infrastructure, and a cleaner, safer environment.

One major step forward would be



the development of local factories to produce goods that can be exported. At present, St. Maarten depends heavily on imports, which increases costs for businesses and residents. By building factories and encouraging local production, whether in food processing, renewable energy components, or small manufacturing, we could create jobs, strengthen our economy, and reduce our reliance on outside markets. Producing our own goods would also allow St. Maarten to share unique products with the world, boost-

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St. Maarten's Awaited Journey

BY ALJENÉE HENRY

The Youth Creative Vision Contest, held in connection with the 2025 Governor's Symposium, challenged students to share a vision for St. Maarten inspired by lessons from the past and present. After the results were announced during the October 15, 2025 symposium, His Excellency Governor Ajamu G. Baly met with the winner and finalists on December 19, 2025, at the Cabinet of the Governor in Harbour View. Third place was awarded to Aljenée Henry of the St. Maarten Academy for her poem, "St. Maarten's Awaited Journey." This is her piece:

It started with a voice,
A whisper that sought the need for change
Due to the overuse of power that grew too great,
Diederick Van Romondt called it the mighty hand
of power that only dictates
From the one hand of the solo singer
And knew the song needed to be rearranged.

Power from Curaçao had stretched too high
Placing the Netherlands Antilles including St. Maarten in the sky
With the most ironclad seats in Parliament hard to lie
Total control over development aid beyond our eye,
How could my country, St. Maarten,
Not feel played, afraid, betrayed and even enslaved?

Millions of ignored requests and unfair rules,
Aruba decided they were changing the rules,
No longer willing to look like a fool.
Aruba left the Netherlands Antilles,
A brave and bold move,
That was highly disapproved
And in hope of autonomy
They seek a brand-new game with their name.

This inspired St. Maarten to say me too,
To seek more freedom, a future new.
In 1994, the referendum band grew;
The choir of St. Maarten sang new hymns,
Though opinions were mainly dim.

When push came to shove,
The people voted to stay
But then realised
That choice led them astray.

So in 2000, when the referendum band came
playing again,
The people rose up, their voices swayed:
"We choose to leave, to stand, rejoice,
At last, we make the rightful choice."

The talks began, the papers signed,
A future for St. Maarten was redefined
October tenth, two-thousand ten,
A chapter closed, a new one began.

The Netherlands Antilles faded away
St. Maarten was born on that major day.
A country within the Kingdom's reign
With pride and hope, yet trials remain.

Since then, twelve governments have come and
gone
One button coalitions didn't last long.
Only once did a full-term stay
From 2019 until today.

Committees watch, advise, and steer,



The CFT's presence is always near.
Audit Chambers, councils too,
Raise questions is autonomy true?

Parliament stalls, new laws delayed
While motions for freedom twice have swayed
Independence whispers, reforms still wait,
St. Maarten stands at a changing gate.

The journey is long, the future unknown,
But the seeds of freedom have surely grown.
Through trials, struggle, and people's will
The dream of St. Maarten is rising still.

Aljenée Henry
St. Maarten Academy

The Future of St. Maarten

continued from pg. 10

ing national pride and economic stability.

Another key improvement is the creation of better road systems. Traffic congestion is a daily challenge for residents and visitors alike. Building more roads, including overhead or elevated roads where possible, would help reduce heavy traffic and make transportation more efficient. In addition, adding more stop lights, visible traffic signs, pedestrian crossings, and garbage bins would make our roads safer and cleaner. A well-planned transportation network would not only save time but also make the island more welcoming to tourists, which remains a crucial part of our economy.

The future of St. Maarten must also include stronger social services to protect and uplift our people. Establishing drug rehabilitation centers would help reduce the number of addicts on the streets and give individuals the chance to recover and rebuild their lives. Creating proper mental health institutions is equally important, as it would provide treatment for those struggling with mental issues while keeping the environment safe and supportive for everyone. In addition, investing in a larger safe haven, especially for abused men, women, and children, would offer shelter and hope to those escaping violence or difficult situations.

Opportunities for youth development and education are another key to a brighter future. Building more sports facilities would allow young people to improve their athletic skills, stay healthy, and possibly compete at higher levels. The government should also offer more scholarships to graduates so they can pursue studies abroad and return to share their knowledge and skills with the island. Furthermore, granting more job opportunities to local students would help them gain experience and build successful careers without having to leave their homeland.

In conclusion, the future of St. Maarten depends on visionary planning and action. By building local industries, improving transportation infrastructure, strengthening social services, and creating more opportunities for education and employment, we can create an island that is more independent, efficient, and compassionate. With the right investments and the support of our leaders and community, St. Maarten can continue to shine as a model of progress in the Caribbean. Seeing that tourism is our main industry, there should be more online payments available for the tourists and also the locals in these times of modern technology. I believe that in the near future, if our leaders implement all these factors, St. Maarten/St. Martin will elevate to another level and will rise and shine to be the number one destination in the Caribbean. "Oh, sweet St. Maarten land!"

Terriann Buckley
St. Maarten Academy
Vocational Business Campus

Feature
Page

LEARNING IN A WORLD POWERED BY ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

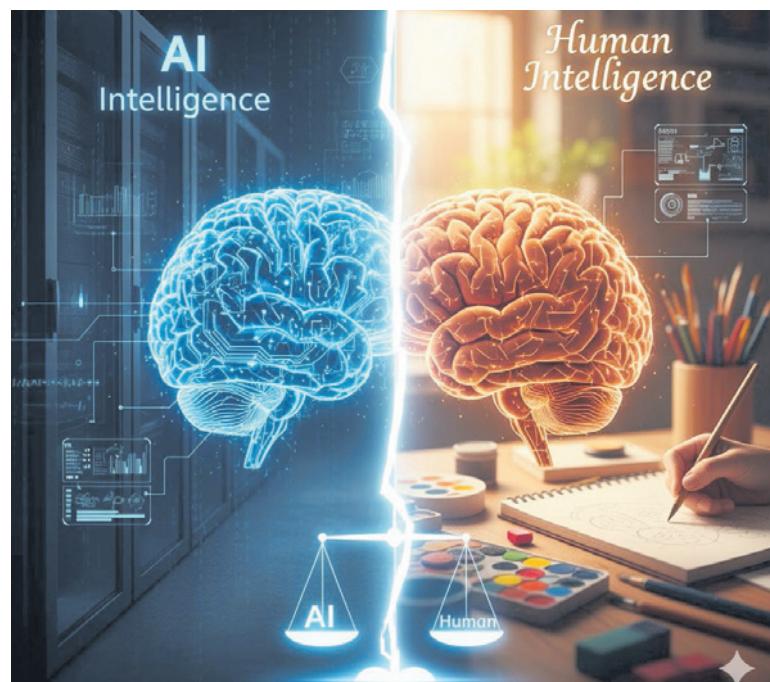
BY ARTI BULLAND

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is changing many parts of our lives, and schools are no exception. AI is now widely used by everyone and people are slowly adapting to it. Teachers use AI to help plan lessons, while students use it to better understand and break down difficult topics. AI is changing how learning happens. Even though it can be very useful, schools are being careful about how much AI is allowed. Most schools today only allow AI to a small extent, usually around 20 per cent or less. This shows that while AI is welcome as a tool, it is not meant to replace students' own thinking and work.

Al is changing learning in several ways, bringing both benefits and disadvantages in some cases. Firstly, it makes learning more personalised. Every student learns differently, and AI can adjust explanations to match a student's needs. For example, if one student struggles with a math problem, AI models can break it down step by step, while another student might get a quicker, more challenging explanation. This allows students to work at their own pace.

AI can also help students explore topics more deeply. It can suggest new ideas, give examples or even develop and brainstorm ideas. Students can use AI to check their understanding, ask questions or organise information. This turns learning from simply memorising facts into active thinking and exploration, which helps students to better retain knowledge.

AI provides immediate feedback. In traditional classrooms, students might have to wait to find out if their answers are correct. With AI, students can get quick guidance on their work, helping them understand mistakes and correct them



while the material is still fresh. This instant feedback loop helps students improve faster and build confidence in subjects they find difficult.

A tricky part of AI is how it affects writing. Some schools use AI detection tools to see if a student used too much AI or plagiarised. But these tools are not perfect. Sometimes, students who didn't use AI at all get flagged just because

their writing sounds advanced or uses "big words." This can be frustrating. Students who try hard to write well may feel like they are being punished. Some may even avoid using complex vocabulary to make sure their work looks natural and not written by AI. This raises the question of whether a human is as advanced as AI. This is a challenge schools are still trying to solve.

While AI has many benefits, it also comes with disadvantages. One concern is that students and teachers might start comparing human abilities to AI. AI can process information quickly, suggest ideas, and organise work in ways humans cannot do as efficiently.

Of course, AI was created by humans, but its speed and accuracy can make people feel like they are "behind" or less capable. Some students may worry that no matter how hard they try, AI can always produce more polished results. This can create stress and make students rely too much on technology instead of trusting their own thinking.

Another disadvantage is that overuse of AI can weaken important skills. Problem solving, creativity, and critical thinking can suffer if students lean too heavily on AI. If AI does too much for them, students might not fully understand concepts or develop the confidence to solve problems independently. Some people argue that allowing only 20% AI use is too little, especially considering how advanced and widely available it has become.

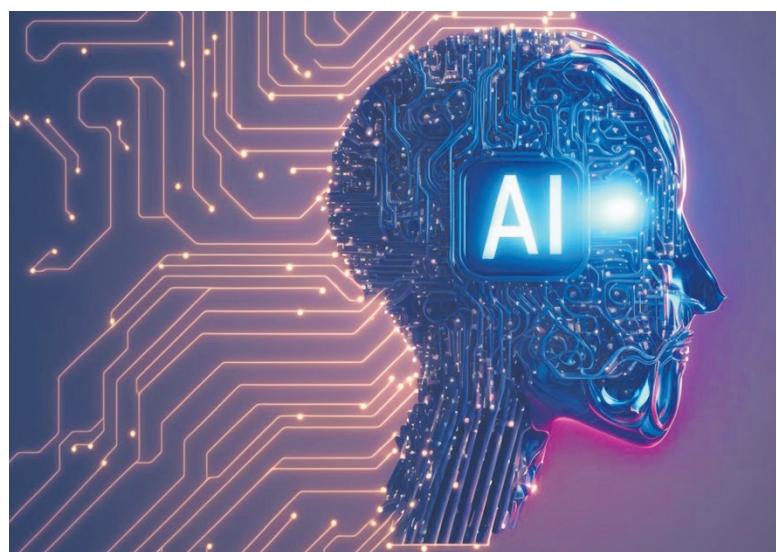
AI is no longer a rare tool, it is everywhere. Limiting students to such a small portion of AI use may prevent them from fully benefiting from its potential. In a world where AI is becoming part of everyday life, restricting its use too much could make learning slower and less efficient, rather than helping students adapt to the technology they will face in the future.

Schools want students to use AI as a tool, not as a shortcut. When used carefully, AI can support learning without replacing the effort students need to put in. This teaches students responsibility. Students must decide what to do themselves and when to use help. This builds independence, decision making, and confidence, which are all key skills for school and life.

AI is not going away, so students and schools need to learn how to use it responsibly. The best approach is to have a proper balance, students can use AI to help understand and organise ideas, but the majority of work should come from their own thinking. Teachers and schools also need to trust students and focus on growth rather than just checking for AI use.

AI has the power to make learning easier and more engaging. When used carefully and in moderation, it can help students succeed while still keeping education meaningful. The goal is not to stop students from using AI, but to teach them how to use it wisely as a helper, not a replacement for their own effort.

By limiting AI to a small percentage of work, schools encourage students to think for themselves, be creative, and learn deeply. AI is a tool that, when used correctly, can transform learning for the better without taking away the effort, responsibility, and skills that make education valuable.



SOCIAL MEDIA VS REALITY: THE IMPACT OF COMPARISON

BY SANA AGNANI

When was the last time you saw a "bad" photo on your feed? Social media trends constantly show us perfect skin, perfect bodies and perfect lives. For teens still figuring out who they really are, these trends don't just entertain us, they shape how we see ourselves. In less than five minutes on social media, it's easy to feel like everyone else is prettier, has a better life or is luckier than you are. But the things we see online – is it actually real or just a fan-

tasy version of life? How much of it is edited, filtered or staged?

Teenagers spend hours and hours scrolling on TikTok and Instagram. It all starts off by seeing someone online, maybe once or twice on your feed. A little thought might form, "They seem so happy." This statement may seem meaningless, but that's how comparison starts. "What do they have that makes them so happy? Why don't I have it? Maybe if I had it, I



would be happier." The algorithm is set in such a way that if you interact with someone's content, it appears more frequently on your feed. The more and more you see individuals having what you wish to have – healthier hair, a "better" body, a smaller nose, bigger lips, anything that falls under societal standards – the more pessimistic thoughts form in your mind.

Everyone experiences this at some point in their life. Sometimes it can stem from bullying by peers, comparisons made by family, or even pressure we place on ourselves internally. It's easier to wish we could live someone else's life, rather than fighting through ours. But do we really know someone's story, or do we just know what they allow us to know? It's effortless to think past reality, especially when you're so focused on one goal: comparison. Over time, this comparison can affect how teenagers see themselves. Confidence gradually turns into self-doubt. Things that once seemed insignificant, like skin texture or body, is now viewed as a flaw. Low self-esteem can be really challenging to overcome, especially alone. As confidence fades, it can begin to feel like nobody

understands what you're going through. But that's false. Everyone, even social media influencers and models, has once struggled with their thoughts at some point. They also have insecurities, challenges or unseen struggles, but we're so focused on what's shown in front of us, that we forget what truly happens behind the screen.

You might come across someone on your feed with smoother skin, a more toned body, or even tiny details like blonde highlights in their hair, which might seem insignificant to others but can feel huge when comparing yourself. Thoughts arise, "I'm not good enough," which cause lasting damage. Comparison isn't just in your head; it alters your behaviour. For example, avoiding pictures or videos of yourself, spending hours trying to "fix" appearance, or even obsessively checking social media for validation. Recognising these thoughts is the first step to not allowing them to control you. Understanding that social media often presents a mask, rather than reality, can help us refocus on our own journey.

Feature

Ways Not to Be Broke: How Digital Marketing Can Pay You

BY SHILOH WILLIAMS

For the longest time, I ignored digital marketing. My mom would send me Facebook videos about people "making money online", and I would scroll right past them. It sounded like one of those too-good-to-be-true trends that pops up, gets people excited, then disappears.

Then I actually learned what digital marketing is, and I realised something: a lot of it is not magic, it is marketing, just online. Teens are already on social media every day, we already know what grabs attention, what people share, and what people click. Digital marketing is basically learning how to use that skill on purpose, in a way that can pay you.

What digital marketing really is
Digital marketing means promoting products or services online. That can be on Pinterest, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, a blog, even a group chat link, depending on the rules of the platform and the programme you are using. The goal is to help the right people find the right product, and if you are part of a programme that pays for referrals, you can earn money when someone buys through your link.

One common way beginners start is affiliate marketing. Affiliate marketing means you promote products that already exist instead of creating your own product. You find something useful, share it with your audience, and if someone buys through your special link, you earn a commission.

This is important: commissions are usually small at first. The point is consistency, not a quick win.

The most important rule: be honest about affiliate links
If you are earning money from a link, you need to say that clearly. That is not just "good manners", it is part of advertising rules. The Federal Trade Commission says people should clearly disclose when they have a relationship that could affect what they recommend, and that includes affiliate links.

What does that look like in real life? It can be as simple as:

- * "Affiliate link: I may earn a commission if you buy."
- * "I earn a small commission from links in this post."

Put it where people will actually see it, not hidden at the bottom.

Can teens do this? Yes, but read

the age rules

Before you jump in, check the rules for the platform and the affiliate programme you want to use. Some programmes require you to be old enough to enter a legal contract, and some platforms have special rules for business accounts.

For example, Pinterest says you must be at least 13 to use the platform, and its Business Terms say that anyone under 16 is not allowed to use or access a business account.

So, if you are under the required age for an affiliate programme or a business account, the smart move is to involve a parent or guardian and do it the right way, not by lying about your age. That can get accounts banned and money withheld.

How affiliate marketing works in simple terms

Here is the basic flow:

1. You sign up for an affiliate programme (some are free).
2. You choose products that match a theme or interest.
3. The programme gives you a trackable link.
4. You share that link through your content.
5. When people buy through your link, you earn a commission.

The trick is not spamming links. If your page feels like a bunch of ads, people will scroll past you. If your page is helpful, people will trust you.

Pick a niche that matches your real life

A niche is just a focus. It is what your content is "about". This matters because random content attracts random people, and random people do not buy.

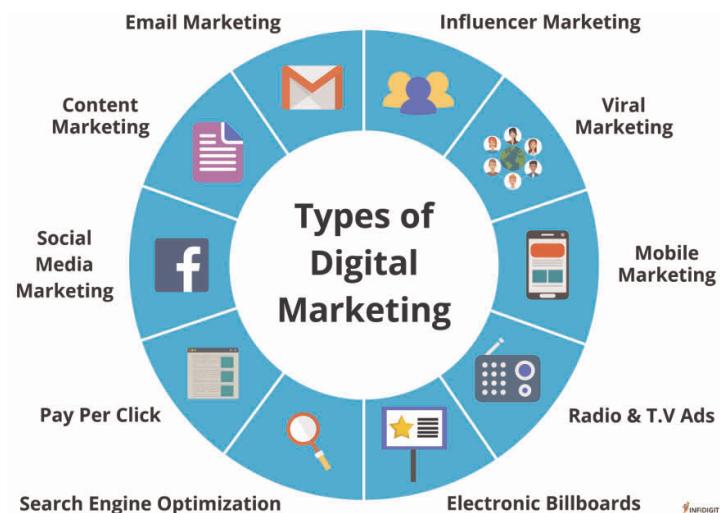
Teen-friendly niches that can work:

- * Study tips and school supplies.
- * Budget tech, phone accessories, laptop bags.
- * Fitness basics, home workouts, sports gear.
- * Skin care for teens, hair routines, self-care.
- * Gaming setups, headphones, controllers.
- * Travel basics, carry-on essentials, packing lists.

The best niche is one you can talk about without forcing it. If you already recommend things to friends, you already have a niche.

Why Pinterest is a cheat code for beginners

Pinterest is not like Instagram



where posts disappear fast. Pinterest works more like a search engine. People go there looking for ideas, "cheap healthy lunches", "study routine", "room décor", "natural hair styles", "best budget headphones". If your pin answers what they are searching for, your content can keep getting clicks long after you posted it.

To start, you create pins that lead to a page with your affiliate links. That page could be a simple blog post, a Linktree-style page, or a platform that allows it, depending on the programme rules.

Pinterest also has a guide on getting a business account, and it spells out that you enter your age during set-up and accept the Business Terms.

Facebook can work too, but it is about community

Facebook can be useful if you understand groups and pages. People still use Facebook for recommendations, especially parents and adults with money. You can:

- * Post helpful content on a page.
- * Join groups and engage normally (not spam).
- * Share product lists when it fits the conversation and rules.

If you only show up to drop links, people will ignore you or report you. If you show up with real tips, then your links feel like extra help, not a hustle.

What you post if you do not want to be annoying

Here are examples that feel normal, not pushy:

- * "3 school supplies that actually helped me stay organized."
- * "Cheap gym basics for starting out."
- * "What's in my backpack for exam season."
- * "My study timer setup, plus the app I use."
- * "Travel essentials I wish I had

last year."

Then you include your disclosure and the link. A strong strategy is to post problem-solving content. People do not wake up wanting to click your link. They wake up wanting a solution. Your content should feel like a solution.

How long until it pays?

Most people do not make real money in week one. It can take months of posting consistently, learning what works, and improving your content. That is normal. Digital marketing is less like winning a raffle and more like building a skill. Consistency is what separates "I tried it once" from "I built a side income."

A reality check teens need

Digital marketing can help you earn money, but it still comes with responsibilities:

- * Keep receipts and track what you earn, money has rules.
- * Avoid scams that promise guaranteed income.
- * Never share personal info publicly.
- * Do not lie about products just to make a sale.
- * Protect your time, your grades still matter.

If you do it right, you learn marketing, communication, design, and discipline, all skills that can help you later, even if you never become an influencer.

The point

So yes, safe to say I should have watched those videos my mom kept sending. Not because digital marketing is easy money, but because it is a real option when you treat it like a skill. If you are already online every day, you might as well learn how to use the internet in a way that gives something back.

Procrastinating as a Procrastinator

BY ALISAH KIRTON

As a student on St. Maarten, I have grappled with procrastination while attempting to juggle classes, assignments, group work, and personal commitments. The numerous distractions in my environment, ranging from family responsibilities to social events, initially led me to shy away from creating a schedule, fearing that it would only amplify my feelings of inadequacy regarding unfinished tasks. However, my struggles ultimately revealed that procrastination was intensifying my stress and negatively impacting my academic performance. Through the process of learning to construct a flexible and realistic schedule, I found significant improvements in my time management skills without feeling overwhelmed.

A key insight I gained was the importance of simplicity in scheduling. Over-planning each hour of my day often resulted in feelings of defeat before I even began. Instead, I

shifted my focus to a few critical tasks each day. For instance, when faced with a science assignment at the University of St. Martin, I would break down the work into manageable sections, deciding to concentrate on one part, such as crafting the introduction or conducting research, rather than attempting to tackle the entire paper at once.

Implementing short time blocks for tasks proved beneficial as well. Long study sessions felt daunting, especially after a full day of classes, so I adopted a strategy of working in 30-minute shifts, allowing for brief breaks in between. During exam preparation, this method entailed reviewing specific topics one at a time, making the process feel less overwhelming and more sustainable.

Prioritisation was another critical strategy. I recognised a tendency to sidestep large projects in favour of less significant tasks, like shopping or



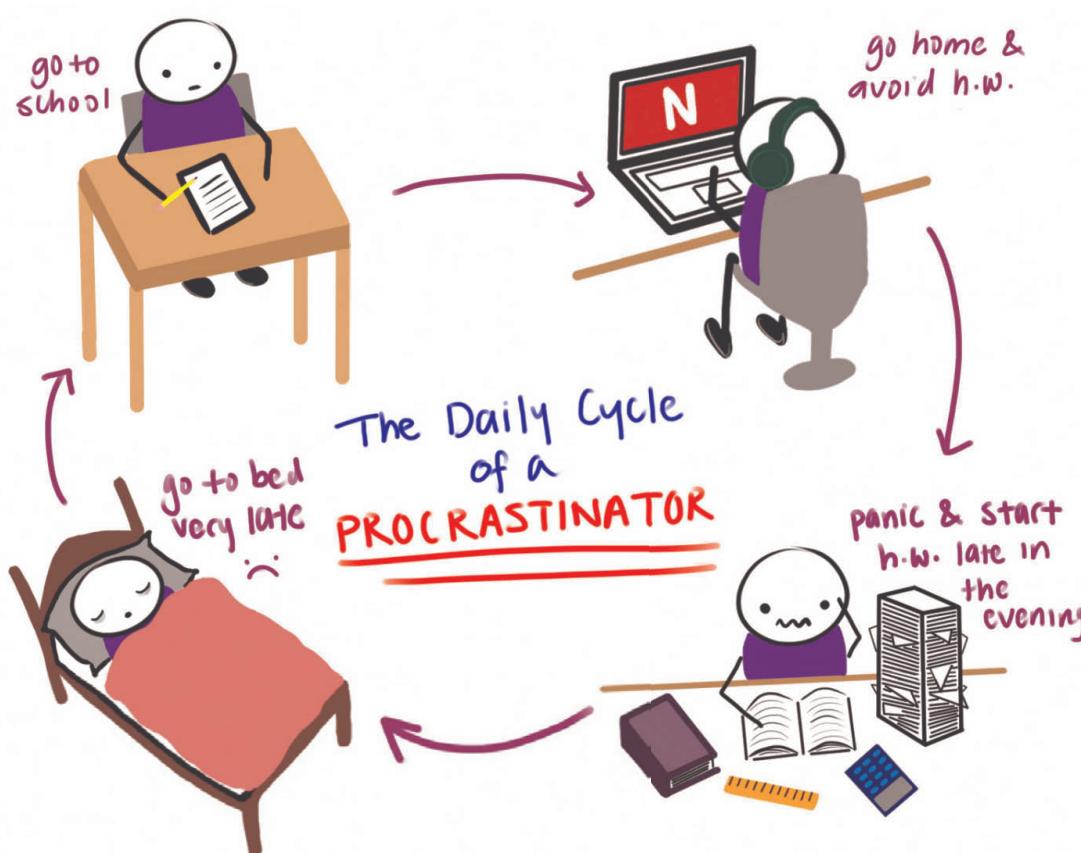
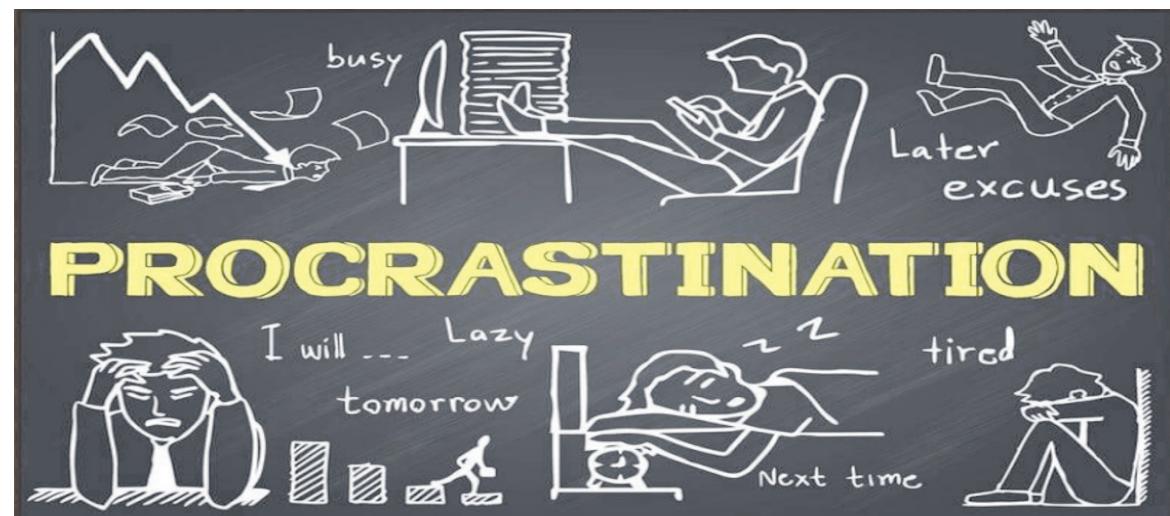
sorting notes. By designating one key task each day that genuinely required my focus, such as an impending research paper, I could tackle it early in the day, which provided a sense of accomplishment and motivation to continue working.

Incorporating scheduled breaks and personal time made a substantial difference. By consciously planning moments to unwind, whether at the beach with family or simply taking a break, I felt more balanced and less stressed. Allowing for relaxation enhanced my ability to concentrate during study sessions.

Rewarding myself also emerged as a motivational strategy. After completing academic tasks, I granted myself time for leisure activities, such as watching a show or going out. This positive reinforcement transformed my scheduling experience into something more enjoyable and motivated me to tackle my workload rather than shy away from it.

Overall, scheduling has significantly enhanced my time management capabilities, reducing stress, minimising last-minute pressure, and improving the quality of my academic output. It has offered clarity and structure to my responsibilities. Nevertheless, there are drawbacks; sometimes, I find the limitations of a schedule to be stifling, especially in the face of unexpected interruptions. Sometimes a friend would like to hang out, and it interrupts and shifts my study time. When I fail to meet my planned tasks, frustration and disappointment can arise. Furthermore, maintaining a consistent schedule during hectic academic periods poses its challenges. You cannot always plan everything; sometimes you need to be a bit spontaneous.

In conclusion, my journey with scheduling as a procrastinator has shown that while structure is essential, it need not be rigid to be effective. By keeping my approach straightforward, utilising shorter work sessions, prioritising responsibilities, planning for breaks, and incorporating flexibility, I have successfully improved my time management. Although scheduling presents a mixture of advantages and disadvantages, tailoring it to suit my student life in St. Maarten has significantly aided my efforts to curtail procrastination and enhance my academic performance.



Feature

THE IMPORTANCE OF PUBLIC TRANSPORT IN SMALL ISLAND NATIONS

BY ADITI RAJPAL

Public transport is an important type of transportation that you can find in every country, but its importance is even greater in small countries like St. Maarten. In a small island where distances are short, resources are limited, and many families depend on affordable travel, public transport becomes indispensable for daily life. For school children especially, public transport is not just a convenience, but a necessity. Many students depend on this system to access opportunities, activities and education through regular public buses, private buses, and free school buses. Public transport also has an economic impact that makes the country run better.

In St. Maarten, many school children take the bus every day. The government's yellow school buses are such a common idea, but they are extremely helpful. Every student can travel to and from school for free because of these buses. This truly makes education accessible to all, regardless of what financial situation people are in. This is particularly important in a small country where not every family has a car or can manage the cost of taxis every day. So, besides the school buses, some students also take private buses, but these are more expensive. One child alone on a private bus can be US \$100. For just about US \$1 or US \$1.50, however, students can use the regular public buses that run along the main roads. These affordable options really help students get to school, after-school activities, tutoring, and sports practices without having to rely on their par-



ents for every single ride.

When transportation is something that is both affordable and easy to get, students are not stuck because of where their home might be. Children can go to better schools, join in clubs and sports, and really keep their roots in their community. In a small country, where getting around



can be tough for some, public transport really helps make things fair. It means more children have a chance to attend school and participate in their social lives. Many students would find it difficult to attend class every day without these services, which could result in missed days, a drop in their grades, and fewer opportunities in the future.

Public transport in St. Maarten also has an economic impact. Getting around can be quite expensive these days, right? That's where affordable buses come in. They can really help families save some cash since they won't need to spend so much on fuel for their own cars, those often-pricey car repairs, or those daily taxi trips that really add up. This means families have more money for important things like groceries, school supplies, and healthcare. For a small country with not much road, public transport is really good because it means fewer

traffic jams and we use less gas. Buses really help a lot of people get around all at once, which makes transportation better for everyone and helps our daily economic activities keep going.

The way we move around is changing, and it's pretty cool to see. Lately, there are more taxis driving around, and new transportation apps have shown up in St. Maarten. Sure, these services are handy, but they can really add up compared to taking the bus. If taxis keep replacing affordable public transport options, it could make it much tougher for students and low-income families to get around for their regular activities. This really shows that protecting and making public transport better is super important, especially in small countries. The main thing is, there just aren't a lot of other options for everyone to get by.

