

The Virgin Islands Consortium

School Attendance Below Average Across Territory, Says Department of Education

Superintendents testify on attendance challenges and academic success correlation before Senate committee

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Poor attendance and tardiness are a “systemic issue” in schools, says Stefan Jürgen, Department of Education insular superintendent for St. Thomas/St. John. Both Mr. Jürgen and his St. Croix counterpart Ericilda Ottley-Herman expressed concern about attendance rates when they testified before the Senate Committee on Education and Workforce Development on Monday.

Behind their concern is the consensus among education officials that there is a direct correlation between attendance and academic success. On St. Thomas/St. John, data shows that there are seven schools in the district which need improvement in attendance rates, Senator Carla Joseph pointed out. Mr. Jürgen said that “attendance data is at the forefront of our discussions with the principals.”

The challenges, according to Mr. Jürgen, require a “big discussion.” He noted that principals have observed that it is usually the same parents who are tardy, and said that the district’s truancy officer, along with their attendance counselor, may “visit the child’s home or the parent’s job just to encourage parents to make sure that children are coming to school.”

He also reminded parents that they face fines for keeping their children away from school.

However, Mr. Jürgen admitted that measures implemented to encourage student attendance are “not working to the degree that it should be because students are not in school.”

Meanwhile, on St. Croix, school attendance has taken a “disconcerting drop” among the Big Island’s youngest learners, according to Ms. Ottley-Herman. Kindergarten attendance was most recently recorded as 86%, a worrying phenomenon particularly when compared to attendance at high schools, which currently stands at “a commendable 93%.”

While attendance levels vary at schools across St. Croix, Ms. Ottley-Herman assured senators that the Dept. of Education is working assiduously on “closing the achievement gap.” Individual schools have been tasked with “creating attendance teams” that will liaise with parents of regularly absent students. According to Ms. Ottley-Herman, in “extreme cases” the teams will “engage outside agencies as an intervention method.”

Committee chair Senator Marise James, notably taken aback by the update, admitted that she was “at a loss” and wondered what the Department of Education was doing about parents who fail to take their children to school. In response, the St. Croix superintendent shared that some parents have complained about school start times that are later than the usual 8:00 a.m. commencement of work hours. Despite drop-off times at most schools beginning before the 8 a.m. work hour, “many parents find themselves going to work...and when they have a break or opportunity [they drop] their children to school,” Ms. Ottley-Herman disclosed.

A change to a 7:30 start time at the Eulalie Rivera School has resulted in an increase in their attendance rate,” reported the St. Croix superintendent. Come March, the Department of Education intends to introduce a parent survey to determine whether school start times play a role in student attendance.

Lawmakers remained bewildered by the explanation, prompting Ms. Ottley-Herman to report that the DOE is also working with the Department of Human Services to intervene where necessary. “We’ve done as much as we can do outside of going home, picking up the child and bringing them to school,” declared the superintendent.

Senator Carla Joseph subsequently drew a parallel to current work ethic concerns where employees are “not coming to work on time.” “This is going to go into your child and our community...the parents have to take the children to school,” stressed Ms. Joseph.

According to Mr. Jürgen, poor attendance trends are indicative of wider issues among the territory’s students. “Every system of that child’s life is in need of support,” he told lawmakers.

Ms. James called for a collaborative approach that would transcend “beyond the surface level thinking and [go] to root causes,” concurring with Mr. Jürgen that absenteeism could be the result of a host of possible issues.