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Public Schools Closing Down For At Least 3 Weeks. No Plan in Place Yet for Students Who Rely on School-Based Meals, Distance Learning

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Complex opening day of school in Sept. 2015. By. ERNICE GILBERT/ VI CONSORTIUM

Beginning Wednesday, March 18th, public schools in the Virgin Islands will be closed for students for at least three weeks as the territory grapples with the rapidly spreading coronavirus (COVID-19). Department of Education employees are still required to report to work.

The announcement by Gov. Albert Bryan came Monday during the Government House weekly press briefing. While the measure was not unexpected – private schools across the territory have already announced the suspension of classes – the announcement essentially gives public school parents, guardians and students one day's notice to make adjustments to work and family

schedules. "If it becomes necessary to adjust these timeframes, we will surely notify the public in advance," Gov. Bryan said.

"We understand the implications this has for working parents and the parents of children with special needs. We also know that many children depend on our school system for a substantive portion of their nutritional needs," the governor said.

"There are obvious concerns around continued learning options and meals for students during this closure," said Education Commissioner Racquel Berry-Benjamin. Administrators from the St. Croix and the St. Thomas/ St. John districts are meeting this week to further develop academic and other plans for the closure, she said.

Commissioner Berry-Benjamin said teachers were advised to create three weeks of lesson plans for students to follow until the classrooms reopen. "These plans will be used for the implementation of any supplemental, online programs arranged by the Department of Education," she said.

Nutritional Meals

Government officials acknowledge that thousands of the territory's students rely on schools for several important meals of the day.

But as of Monday there was no specific plan to get those needed meals to students during the school closure. "The VI Department of Education has begun the legwork to set this operation in motion," Ms. Berry-Benjamin said. "Parents will be informed of meal distribution locations as soon as details are finalized."

Remote Learning

Teachers are currently receiving training for online learning programs, Ms. Berry-Benjamin said. Only certain grade-level teachers had previously been trained on these programs. All grade-level teachers are being trained this week.

Students on Monday completed a survey of what technologies they have access to at home – i.e., internet services, laptop or tablet computers, etc. But 12th graders will be provided with available Chromebooks, iPads or other school-owned devices to use during the shutdown, Ms. Berry-Benjamin said.

Even so, the department had no answer for how it would manage a number of problems arising from remote learning. This includes providing remote instructions to students who lacked internet access or the devices to work from. And performance-based learning such as music and art presented new complications as well.

"We just can't do it all. In normal conditions of course the quality is at a certain level. However once we get into emergency mode, then the quality of our daily programs and services adjust to the conditions," she said.