

## Dept. of Education Loses 46 Teachers, 174 Eligible to Retire by Fall; Only 21 of 51 New Hires Local as Staffing Crisis Grows Ahead of School Merger

As the Education Department braces for more retirements and continued staffing shortfalls, officials push recruitment efforts, launch a “Grow Your Own” program, and prepare to close John H. Woodson Jr. High when Arthur A. Richards K-8 opens in 2026.

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Education Commissioner Wells-Hedrington at Monday's budget hearing. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE.

With a new school year fast approaching, the V.I. Department of Education must once again contend with the age-old challenge of teachers departing the system, either through resignation or

retirement.

During Monday's meeting of the Committee on Budget, Appropriations and Finance, Education Commissioner Dionne Wells-Hedrington informed lawmakers that 35 employees have signaled their intent not to return in the upcoming school year. That figure includes 12 teachers from the St. Croix district and 10 educators in St. Thomas/St. John. These figures are compounded by news of 26 teachers either resigning or retiring in St. Croix, and another 20 in the St. Thomas/St. John district. Additionally, as of September 1, 2025, "174 employees will be eligible for retirement, of which 25 are administrators, 16 paraprofessionals and 66 teachers."

"The Virgin Islands Department of Education continues to face challenges in filling critical teaching positions," Ms. Wells-Hedrington lamented. Some 51 qualified candidates have been selected to begin teaching in the upcoming school year, only 21 of them local to the territory. Nonetheless, the continued harsh reality of staffing shortages has prompted VIDE to get creative.

The department has now partnered with the Department of Labor and the University of the Virgin Islands to conceptualize and launch a "Grow Your Own" initiative. "This initiative targeted paraprofessionals in both districts who have expressed an interest in becoming teachers," Wells-Hedrington explained. She anticipates that 20 individuals are scheduled to begin online classes to that end this fall.

Aside from this, Wells-Hedrington maintained the territory still needs to be "aggressive in our recruitment and retention process." She was replying to Senator Angel Bolques Jr., who was concerned about "high-impact positions." VIDE has pledged to continue exit surveys "to see why people are leaving and if it is something that we could shift in the department."

Nonetheless, the commissioner informed lawmakers that some recruitment efforts will continue to bear no fruit. "We have paraprofessionals sitting right now with degrees in teaching that refuse to go into teaching positions for whatever reason," Wells-Hedrington stated.

District Superintendent for St. Thomas/St. John Stefan Jurgen, though, was able to provide a reason – money. "It's an issue with the financial position of where those paraprofessionals are and some of the subsidies that they receive, and not wanting to give that up to become a teacher."

"Some of them have no intent to grow and they're comfortable where they are, added deputy superintendent Carla Bastian-Knight.

"That obviously puts the department at a disadvantage because you need to make sure that you continue to grow and expand," noted committee chair Senator Novelle Francis.

VIDE, Ms. Wells-Hedrington said, must pay "closer attention to our human capital" to avoid "that burnout that we're seeing, or we don't have individuals leaving the profession to go to something that is not as strenuous."

With the Arthur A. Richards K-8 School set to open in 2026, plans are underway to close John H. Woodson Jr. High School, raising questions about how staffing needs will be affected. "They're going into Arthur Richards," Education Commissioner Wells-Hedrington told Senator Hubert Frederick. "We cannot keep John Woodson open any longer. We're taking steps to maximize our resources and properly distribute the students we have," she said.

The consolidation of those schools is part of VIDE's efforts to rebuild the territory's education infrastructure after the damage caused by the 2017 hurricanes. "I don't think that would ever be off the table," she told Senator Francis, who posed a question about future plans for consolidation.

“It's based on what trends we see at the time.”

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