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V.I. Dept. of Education Shifts Special Education Positions to Local Funding Amid Federal Layoffs

With the U.S. Department of Education eliminating nearly all staff overseeing special education, states and territories — including the USVI — are being forced to assume greater responsibility for compliance, funding, and service continuity.

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The V.I. Department of Education has moved all special education positions off federal grants and onto the local budget to protect services for students with disabilities, following massive layoffs at the U.S. Department of Education that have effectively dismantled the federal Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS).

Commissioner Dionne Wells-Hedrington confirmed to the Consortium on Monday that the restructuring was a preemptive measure to ensure that services such as speech therapy, physical therapy, and other support programs continue uninterrupted as federal oversight and funding guidance remain uncertain.

"We don't know who would have oversight over the use and compliance of the fund ... we are waiting for guidance," said Wells-Hedrington. "I took all of my special ed positions off of the grant and I put them on to local, because I'm figuring, well, if he cuts the money, then at least I still could provide teachers for those particular subgroup of students."

Her comments come amid a wave of terminations at the U.S. Department of Education, where nearly all employees in OSERS and its subsidiary office, the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), were fired late last week. The cuts were part of a broader "reduction in force" (RIF) ordered during the second week of the ongoing federal government shutdown, which has seen staff reductions across multiple agencies.

Before the firings, roughly 466 Education Department employees were identified as part of the downsizing effort. Reports indicate that just two senior staff members remain in OSERS and one in the Rehabilitation Services Administration, leaving most of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) oversight and compliance functions dormant.

Despite the upheaval in Washington, Wells-Hedrington emphasized that special education services in the Virgin Islands remain operational and that no local teachers or staff have been laid off. "Special ed is still open ... still open and running," she said.

While federal grants continue to fund special education programs in most U.S. jurisdictions, the commissioner said the Virgin Islands' shift to local funding provides insulation against potential cuts in federal allocations. "If he chooses to cut the money, it would mean services are cut ... speech therapy, physical therapy, and those types of services," she explained. "So far, we have all of our funding."

The department's focus now, she said, is on clarity: "We don't know what the future would hold ... he's cutting back all the positions on the federal government level that would normally have oversight over us."

The layoffs are part of a broader series of cuts triggered by the ongoing government shutdown, now in its second week. Office of Management and Budget Director Russell Vought confirmed Friday that "the RIFs have begun," indicating that the administration's downsizing efforts are intended to be permanent rather than temporary furloughs.

The U.S. Department of Education has already issued notices to nearly 500 employees across multiple divisions, including student support, civil rights, and special education.

For now, the V.I. Department of Education remains functional and continues to deliver special education services territory-wide. However, the absence of federal oversight means local authorities will likely bear greater responsibility for compliance, monitoring, and reporting under IDEA — roles historically handled by the U.S. Department of Education.

Commissioner Wells-Hedrington said the department is monitoring developments closely. "Once we have guidance, we will move forward," she said. "For now, we continue to

provide services. But we are definitely up in arms right now — we just don't know what's next."

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