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Bryan Announces Cancellation of In-Person School Classes for Remainder of School Year; 'Virtual' Ceremonies Planned For 2020 Graduates; Coronavirus Cases Rise to 45

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Governor Albert Bryan announced during his administration's Wednesday coronavirus press briefing that a determination was made to cancel in-person public school classes for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year. This means students will not be back on campus until September, when the 2020-2021 school year is set to commence.

Critically, learning will continue virtually as the Dept. of Education has been doing since the stay-at-home order by Mr. Bryan was issued in March.

Latest Coronavirus Numbers, according to the Dept. of Health:

- Tests performed as of Wednesday: 322
- Positive: 45 (14 on St. Croix, 29 on St. Thomas and 2 on St. John)
- Negative: 242
- Pending: 35 (9 on St. Croix, 23 on St. Thomas and 2 on St. John)
- Recovered: 39
- Deaths: 1

Additionally, students who meet the requirements for graduation this year will not get to experience the in-person traditional ceremonies that have been used to honor students and hand them their diploma. Instead, Dept. of Education Commissioner Racquel Berry-Benjamin spoke of "virtual graduations" that have been planned.

Dept. of Education Provides Details on Remote-Learning

The commissioner said the third marking period ended on Friday, March 20, and that students are required to take a photo of their completed assignment from the work packet they received upon the closure of schools on March 17. Students are then required to email those photos to teachers.

"Teachers will indicate to parents and students which assignment to submit," Mrs. Berry-Benjamin said. Submission deadline is Friday, April 24.

With remote learning becoming the new normal at least for the next few months, the commissioner said D.O.E. performed a survey to gain knowledge on the extent of preparedness of its students relative to the accessibility of technology to facilitate the experience. These technologies include internet access and device availability.

Territory-wide, 47 percent of students indicated that they did not have a desktop computer at home; 59 percent said they had laptops; 66 percent said they had a handheld computer or smartphone, while 34 percent said they did not; and 18 percent of the students surveyed said they did not have internet access at home, according to Mrs. Berry-Benjamin.

To rectify the issue for students without the requisite technology, Mrs. Berry-Benjamin said D.O.E. had repurposed available federal funds to procure the tools of learning for the students without adequate access — including internet.

She said internet service will be deployed to students without access in "two weeks maximum." The Education commissioner added that students who may not be familiar with the softwares and technologies for learning will be trained by D.O.E.'s information technology arm.

D.O.E. will continue utilizing online learning software such as Edmentum, Accellus and iReady. Senior students in the St. Croix District currently use Accellus to help with school credit recovery, Mrs. Berry-Benjamin said, while students in the St. Thomas-St. John District use an equivalent program, Edmentum.

Students in 1st-8th grade will utilize iReady, according to D.O.E.

Some teachers have been using various apps (Class Do-Jo, Edmodo, and Remind App) to teach students, the commissioner said. D.O.E. also partnered with community stakeholders to launch

what is called the eTeacher Network, "which is another app used to provide students educational offerings through television, radio and social media," the commissioner said.

Relative to promotion, Mrs. Berry-Benjamin said the promotion and retention of students are determined by policy set by the V.I. Board of Education. She said D.O.E. and B.O.E. officials recently met to discuss the impact the coronavirus has had on students, learning, school and teaching. "The board has provided the Dept. of Education with a draft resolution it created to address the promotion and retention of students during the Covid-19 emergency," Mrs. Berry-Benjamin said.

She added, "The Dept. of Education will take the necessary action to comply with the board's policy, which will apply to all students in the Virgin Islands public school system, and will be sure to communicate next steps with parents."

She said discussions on matters relative to the valedictorian, salutatorian, top ten students, honors, credits and GPA for senior high school students will be made after hearing the board's decision on its policy.

The department is also taking the important step of making remote learning a permanent part of its infrastructure, an undertaking the commissioner said will cost "upwards of \$14.5 million." She said the estimate is based on the department's current student and employee population, along with cost of internet, computers and laptops, courses, intervention, assessments and support, as well as training for information technology staff.

"We trust that the [2020 CARES Act](#) will assist in the V.I. Department of Education's efforts to transform public education in the Virgin Islands as we know it," Mrs. Berry-Benjamin said, adding that the department was in the process of reviewing the CARES Act.