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JROTC Instructor Sues After Dept. of Education Cuts Salary From \$108K to \$55K and Seeks \$93,948 Repayment

Desiree Parson says VIDE cut her JROTC instructor salary from more than \$108,000 to \$55,493.97 without notice, then demanded \$93,948.22 back, despite signed hiring documents, personnel approvals and years of audits validating the higher pay within VIDE.

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A former elementary school teacher who became a JROTC instructor is suing the Virgin Islands Department of Education after the department allegedly cut her salary from more than \$108,000 to \$55,493.97 without notice, then later demanded that she repay \$93,948.22 in wages it claimed were overpaid.

In a civil suit filed in District Court, Desiree Parson says VIDE first offered her the JROTC instructor position at a salary of just over \$108,000, paid that amount for approximately five years, and then reduced her pay by 49% in March 2025 “without notice, without a hearing, and without any opportunity to be heard.”

Just over a year later, according to the complaint, VIDE demanded that Ms. Parson repay nearly \$94,000.

Before taking the JROTC position, Ms. Parson was employed by VIDE as an elementary school teacher in a classified position with an annual salary of just over \$65,000. The complaint says her classified status mattered because, “As a classified employee nearing retirement eligibility, she possessed substantial job security that an exempt service appointment could not replicate.”

In December 2019, Ms. Parson says she was offered the JROTC instructor position at a St. Thomas high school. The annual salary was listed at just over \$108,000 and was “reviewed and signed off” by several government officials, including the commissioner of Education and the director of Personnel.

For approximately five years, the complaint says, “VIDE paid that salary without objection through multiple audits.”

Ms. Parson argues that the department’s later position — that her original salary was an overpayment — is contradicted by the circumstances under which she accepted the JROTC post. “The notion that a long-tenured educator... would voluntarily accept a reduction in pay to move into an unclassified, at-will role is not merely unlikely; it is facially absurd,” the complaint states.

The lawsuit says the new salary of \$55,493.97 was 24% lower than what Ms. Parson was earning when she left her teaching position in 2018, without accounting for inflation. “No reasonable employer recruiting an experienced educator would expect acceptance of such terms; no reasonable educator approaching retirement would agree to them,” the complaint says. “The Department’s position is contradicted by basic economic reality.”

The complaint includes several documents that it says show Ms. Parson was properly hired at the higher salary, including an offer of employment on official VIDE letterhead signed by the department’s then-director of Human Resources, her oath of office, and her loyalty statement. According to the complaint, each included the original salary of more than \$100,000 per year.

The lawsuit also points to the Notice of Personnel Action, or NOPA, which it says displayed the “correct” salary and was reviewed and approved through several layers of government. The complaint argues that VIDE cannot now claim the higher salary was paid in error because the job offer at the \$108,000 level “was a deliberate, multi-layered, formally approved governmental action.”

During Ms. Parson’s five years as a JROTC instructor, the lawsuit says, “successive internal personnel actions and multiple internal and external audits re-approved, re-ratified, and re-confirmed the contract salary.” Those actions were taken “without objection, correction, or any indication of discrepancy.”

A new NOPA reducing Ms. Parson’s salary was issued on March 10, 2025. The complaint says it came with “no written basis,” “no explanation of calculations, no identification of any misconduct, and no opportunity to contest the action.”

The lawsuit also argues that the March 2025 salary reduction did not go through the same levels of review as the original NOPA. “A unilateral staff-level action could not undo what four levels of government had formally approved,” the complaint states, while alleging several violations of federal law.

Ms. Parson says the matter escalated in March 2026, when she received a letter claiming that her original salary constituted an overpayment and demanding that she return \$93,948.22 “in full, without accommodation.”

According to the complaint, Ms. Parson sent a letter to Education Commissioner Dionne Wells-Hedrington demanding that the salary reduction be reversed or that she be granted a hearing to discuss the matter. She says she received no response.

The lawsuit also argues that the repayment demand fails to account for taxes Ms. Parson already paid on the salary she received during her five years of work as a JROTC instructor. Requiring repayment of “after-tax wages already paid to the government in taxes would operate as an unlawful double-recovery in VIDE’s favor,” the complaint states.

The lawsuit names the Government of the Virgin Islands and Commissioner Wells-Hedrington as defendants. It alleges violations of procedural and substantive due process, violations of federal law, breach of contract, and unjust enrichment.

Ms. Parson is asking the court to declare the March 2025 salary adjustment and the subsequent demand for repayment unlawful and void. She is also seeking a permanent injunction restoring her annual salary to the original contracted amount, back pay with interest, and an order directing VIDE to correct payroll, tax, and retirement agency records to reflect the original salary.

As of press time, neither VIDE nor the Government of the Virgin Islands had filed a response to the civil complaint.