

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Coffelt Wants To Be "The Education Governor"

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In a recent interview with the *VI Consortium*, the contents of which will be posted online on Thursday, gubernatorial candidate Soraya Diase-Coffelt said she wants to be known as the "education governor."

The former judge said although the Department of Education receives the largest slice of the Government's annual budget (\$160 million), because the department is top-heavy, the money stays at the top and never makes its way down to the principles and school teachers, "and that has to change," she said.

This reporter asked the candidate if she intended to raise teachers salaries if chosen the next Governor, and what, if any, were her plans to overhaul the education system in the

territory.

"We don't know exactly what the true financial situation of the Government is until we go in, so I don't want to say I'm going to promise raises, I'm going to promise to hire teachers, I'm going to promise to hire any number of employees until we know for certain what the financial condition is," she said. "I'd like to say that I'd rather be cautious, I don't want to give people hope, and then disappoint them when I get in. I'd rather be cautious and say, 'this is how we're going to work it out,' based on what we find."

Diase-Coffelt said the education system is one of her and her running mate's big concerns, adding that the corruption that is rampant throughout government has also made its way to into the Dept. of Ed.

"John and I met with a group of educators, teachers, administrators -- we hear their cries. It's very hard, their classrooms weren't maintained this past summer, they have to work long hours, they're dealing with children who are stressed -- a lot of different issues, and then the pay issue," she said. "What we will say is that we're committed. We know that your department gets the No. 1 budget for the Virgin Islands, so we need to make sure that the money trickles down to you."

She highlighted issues of "waste and mismanagement."

"There are a lot of waste and mismanagement, and we have to say there's a lot of corruption," Diase-Coffelt said. "There's corruption permeating all layers of government. So it's not just Alvin Williams, and that type where you have people paying Senators money, there's a lot of corruption where contracts are entered into and people are paid more than what the contracts are really owed."

Diase-Coffelt reiterated her stance on education, promising it would be one of the first things her administration tackles if elected.

"I want to be the Education Governor," she said. "I want to make sure that our children can read, and read to grade level."

Diase-Coffelt went on to say she would follow President Barack Obama's model and start teaching children how to read from pre-K, but not wait until third grade to test their reading level.

"[I want to test] them every year until third grade," she said.

She continued: "Why is third grade so important? Because in third grade they test them [and] when they transition to fourth grade, it's no longer learning to read, it's reading to learn. So they've shown statistically that those students who don't learn to read by third grade, they are the ones more than likely to drop out of schools."

To that end, Diase-Coffelt said it is important to "promote literacy."

"If we can get a grasp on that, and really promote literacy, it would be the teachers understanding more the importance of literacy," she said, "it would be the parents understanding the importance of literacy and the community understanding that."

Later, Diase-Coffelt lamented the closure of libraries across the territory.

"We have public libraries that should be opened," she said. "I met with a group of librarians and they gave me their ideas -- they're just chomping at the bit -- they want a governor who is going to be promoting literary and opening these libraries, because they're treasure troves. I grew up in libraries, myself, but I want to be the education governor promoting literacy."

Diase-Coffelt had much more to share on education, the economy, religion and more. Don't miss her Big Interview to be posted on the *VI Consortium* on Thursday.

Photo Credit: Kendall Jones

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