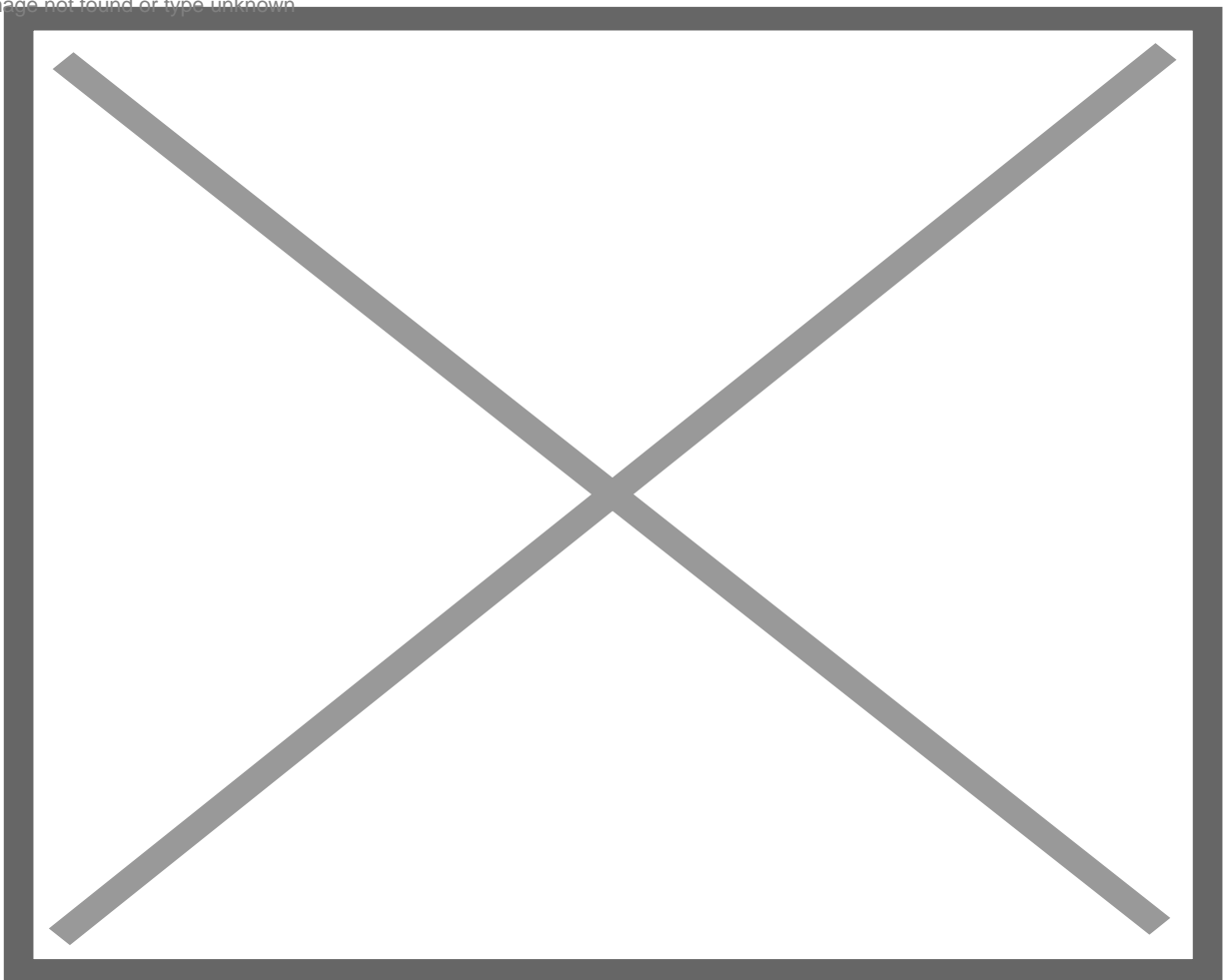


Hundreds of Eligible VI Public School Students Have Not Received Internet Devices or Laptops Needed for Virtual Learning; Senators Seek Clarity on Virtual Graduations

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Robert Moore **May 13, 2020**

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A total of 437 laptop computers, 327 MiFi internet hotspots were distributed to Virgin Islands students to enable as many students as possible to access virtual classrooms to complete school work during the coronavirus pandemic, VI Department of Education Commissioner Racquel Berry Benjamin told Senate lawmakers on Tuesday.

But the rush to hand out the hardware still does not meet the needs of students across the territory. Consider: Of the total items distributed to students over the past month, 171 laptops and 178 internet units were delivered to students in the St. Thomas-St. John District. But Insular

Superintendent Stefan Jurgen of the district said more than 600 students do not have internet access or a computer at home.

In the St. Croix District, 266 laptops and 149 MiFi were given to students, but more than 700 students were lacking the technology at home to participate fully in classwork while schools are closed in order to slow the spread of COVID-19, Carlos McGregor, the Insular Superintendent said.

Members of the Senate Committee on Education and Workforce Development, chaired by Sen. Donna Frett-Gregory, took testimony Tuesday from Ms. Benjamin and other VIDOE administrators on a range of subjects to include available technology for distance learning, promotion policies, credit recovery, and, generally, what the next school year will look like.

“It’s undoubtedly a challenging time for public education in the territory, but this experience in many ways engendered a laser focus in the VIDOE on laying the foundation that would provide all the students the tools necessary to succeed,” Ms. Berry-Benjamin told lawmakers.

The “challenging time” means graduating seniors will not walk with their diplomas in a traditional graduation ceremony. Instead, they will participate in a virtual graduation ceremonies later this month. Sen. Janelle Sarauw carried the concerns of the territory’s high school principals to education officials.

“The principals have expressed their dismay at the announcement of the virtual graduations because they did have a thorough conversation with the department, with the superintendents” before decisions were made about how graduation — a milestone for every high school senior — would take place. Ms. Sarauw asked Ms. Berry Benjamin if principals had been consulted. Yes, she said.

Superintendent Jurgen said he “had conversations” with principals at Charlotte Amalie High School and Ivanna Eudora Kean High on St. Thomas and took their concerns back to the commissioner before any final decisions were made. Superintendent McGregor on St. Croix said a graduation task force, including school principals, was stood up to make decisions about graduation.

Sen. Kurt Vialet sought clarity about what, exactly, “virtual graduation” meant in territory.

“The virtual graduations in the Virgin Islands are being recorded,” Ms. Berry-Benjamin said. “A series of video put together ... we are going through the opening remarks of the governor, the Senate president, etc. The announcement of graduates, indication of honor students. Guest speakers. You are literally watching the exact same thing that would physically be experiencing.”

With no graduating senior walking across a stage in their cap and gown, Sen. Frett-Gregory inquired about why students in both districts were still being charged \$40 graduation fee.

“That is correct,” Mr. Jurgen responded. “The cap and gowns were already ordered. The diploma jacket. The smaller diploma. There is a cost to all of those things,” he said.

Sen. Frett-Gregory suggested the department of education carve out some money from the federal CARES Act funding intended to help states and territories survive the COVID-19 crisis. “A lot of our parents have lost their jobs. We have a crisis, and I don’t think that it is fair or right to be asking parents to pay for graduation when we have some \$23 million coming to the Department of Education specifically for the purposes surrounding COVID-19.”

Regarding federal dollars, the department updated lawmakers on the status of a U.S. Department of Education Compliance Agreement in which the Government of the Virgin Islands was ordered to hire an outside company to manage federal grants.

Fourteen years into the Compliance Agreement, the VIDOE has completed Phase I and Phase Two of a six phase plan, said Jenifer O'Neal, Director of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB).

“It feels like we started over as if we are back to step one in terms of removing TPFA and the responsibilities are returned to the GVI. I am hoping that within three years we can get out of this agreement because it is costing the Government an average of \$2.6 million per year,” Mr. Violet said.

Similarly, Ms. Frett-Gregory was unhappy with the lack of progress toward an exit from the Compliance Agreement. “It is disingenuous to believe that the GVI will ever get out of the third-party fiduciary despite the assistance of a third-party fiduciary agent. The process requires collaboration with other entities and direction should be given to various departments and agencies so that we can get out of this state,” she said.

One of the outside grant managing firms is Bazilio Cobb Associates. Chief Executive Officer Ralph Bazilio defended the company's work. He indicated that significant progress was made in terms of the GVI's management of USDE grants. “GVI has \$30 million in USDE grants with additional grants expected this year totaling \$16 million. USDE continues to fully fund GVI because of the confidence it has in BCA as the TPFA,” Mr. Bazilio said.