

The Virgin Islands Consortium

At Youth Council Senate Hearing, Lack Of Teachers, Low Wages Take Center Stage

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ST. THOMAS -- The Earl B. Ottley Legislative Hall came alive on Monday with members of the Legislative Youth Advisory Council (LYAC), who took over the Senate to hear testimony from officials of the Dept. of Education, the University of the Virgin Islands, the Virgin Islands Board of Education, as well as students representing various learning institutions in this district.

A variety of issues relating to education consumed the time of testifiers and members of the council alike, but the overriding topic of the day was the lack of teachers and how it's affecting students.

Testifier Christopher Jamil, representing the Charlotte Amalie High School, relayed his frustration to members of the youth council. The student recalled the beginning of a semester when the Caribbean History teacher told students that he was only a substitute, and would be acting as such until replaced. Yet, he never was, and the students, Jamil said, didn't seem to mind the situation. But the lack of teachers became a problem in Jamil's biology class after it was revealed that the teacher was on maternity leave.

"When she went out on her maternity leave, so did the class; because there were no more substitute teachers to take her place. That is a problem that lies within our schools," Jamil said. "We don't have enough teachers to take care of the classes that students have to go to, and when we take our substitute teachers and put them in classes, [we are] leaving classes that no longer have teachers."



Christopher Jamil

Jamil's concerns ring strong territory-wide, and was highlighted at a [recent Senate hearing](#) by Senator Kurt Vialet, where the issue of retroactive pay took center stage. Vialet, a former educator himself, said the government must find a way to pay its teachers what they're worth because they're leaving the territory in great numbers. And if their compensation concerns are not allayed, the territory's education system, strained as it is, will collapse, Vialet said.

"In order to be a teacher you have to go away, get a bachelor's degree — a number of them have masters degrees — and we have teachers who are in the system, who have been teaching now for eight years with a master's degree, making \$31,000 and have a tremendous amount of student loans," Vialet said. "So at some point we have to be creative as to how we're going to be able to address their needs."

The problem of pay was echoed by Jamil at yesterday's hearing, who said that substitutes being used year-round as full time teachers were still being paid substitute salaries.

"We have these teachers who work hard; and we have these substitute teachers who work just as hard and they're not being paid as much. And the reason why we don't have enough teachers, is because of those salaries," he said.

"The salary of a teacher is extremely low, and when you think about it, why should it be like that? The teachers teach every generation of students. Everyone who becomes the doctors, the lawyers. Those kids save lives, [but] those teachers teach them how to save

lives. But we're living in a society where people no longer want to become teachers because of the salary being paid," Jamil added.

Dr. Wynant Watty-Benjamin, chief of staff at the DOE, said teacher recruitment has been an ongoing achilles heel for DOE, as salaries in the territory are not as competitive as other markets, and the current budget deficit of the government, lingering at around \$100 million only compounds the problem.

Other issues discussed at the hearing was the alleged neglect of private schools by the department of education, raised by LeShawn Henley, who represented the St. Peter and Paul Catholic School; and the need for a public high school on St. John, raised by Raven Phillips, who represented St. John and Ivanna Eudora Kean High School.