

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Some Substitute Teachers Have Not Been Paid For Two Months

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ST. CROIX -- Some substitute teachers here have gone without pay for the entire months of September and October, and one who tried contacting Department of Education personnel for an explanation was rudely dismissed, causing the teacher, Ms. A. Griffin, a substitute teacher for four years, added stress as she's had to deal with working without pay at a time when the territory's economy remains anemic, and every dollar counts.

According to Ms. Griffin, who teaches at the Elena Christian Junior High School, a Notice of Personnel Action (NOPA) is renewed yearly for substitute teachers, so when she did not see her paycheck on October 16, although she was disappointed, she decided to make some calls in hopes of getting paid at the end of October. Yet, even while she

waited, other substitute teachers who contacted Government House and the offices of various senators, received their money by mid-October, causing even more frustration for the passionate teacher, who told The Consortium that she felt as if she was being punished for going through the rightful routes of getting her situation corrected.

When she finally got some answers from DOE, she was told that her NOPA would soon be processed and her earned money would be released. But no information has changed for the 4-year substitute, including her teacher ID number, begging the question why has it taken so long to renew the NOPA.

Ms. Griffin is not the only one suffering; and she would not have contacted The Consortium had times not been hard and Department of Education personnel disrespectful. There are some new substitutes at Elena Christian facing the same situation.

When reached for comment, DOE Spokeswoman Cynthia Graham told The Consortium that the department is aware of the matter, and promised to pay the affected teachers by Thursday, November 12, which is the next government pay period.

"In response to questions regarding a small portion of substitute teachers in the St. Croix District who have not yet received payroll since the start of the 2015-16 school year, the Virgin Islands Department of Education is aware of the matter and has been working diligently from the onset to resolve it," Ms. Graham said. "Currently, there are approximately 65 teachers in the STX District substitute pool; a total of 10 have been affected. In the STTJ District, there are 60 teachers in the substitute pool; two have been affected. Department officials have been in communication with affected substitute teachers and understand the hardships they are facing. The affected teachers should expect payment on the next pay period scheduled for Thursday, Nov. 12."

Pay issues aside, substitute teachers here receive no benefits, Ms. Griffin said, which means no health insurance, no contributions into the Government Employees' Retirement System and no paid days off.

Ms. Griffin revealed that although she is considered a substitute, she leaves school most days between 3:15 p.m. and 3:30 p.m., and as a math teacher, sees the same students regularly. Her workload, she went on, is just as any other regular teacher, so not receiving paid days off or health benefits, or not being part of GERS is unfair, she said.

Furthermore, the teachers that DOE imported from the Philippines, Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, are given 3-5 years to get their certification in place, Ms. Griffin contended, but they receive benefits nonetheless.

DOE Commissioner Sharon McCollum said recently that the department would be utilizing to full capacity its vast substitute teacher pool to cushion the lack of local teachers, many who left the territory for better pay on the mainland.

In August, Nicole Jacobs, head of HR at DOE, told The Consortium that [over 70 teachers had either resigned or retired](#) from the department since June, and that more teachers had sent resignations through email.

Ms. Jacobs said the problem was exacerbated because outside teachers need certain criteria before getting approval to teach in the territory. So the department, she added, has relied heavily on its substitute teacher pool to fill the widening gap. On August 12, Ms. Jacobs told The Consortium that there were 172 substitute teachers in the territory, a jump of 52 new substitutes based on numbers the department gave a day prior.

"It's different than when you're hiring a secretary," she said. "As a secretary, I can easily train you, but you have to possess key credentials prior to coming in front of the students."

So, while substitute teachers are being utilized on a full-time basis to help allay the problem caused by a drop of certified teachers in the territory, DOE hasn't incentivized these substitutes. Not with paid days off or health insurance, two important benefits of teaching.

"I am the team leader for my teacher group at Elena," said Ms. Griffin, making her case for why substitute teachers should be treated better. She said whenever there are sporting events that Elena students participate in, as team cheerleader, she tries her best to attend.

"I'm not just here sitting back, and it's not just because I'm not being paid, but right is right and wrong is wrong," Ms. Griffin said.

Education Spokeswoman Ms. Graham said substitute teachers are considered on-call employees, and work on an as-need basis.

"Unlike fulltime teachers who work under a contract with the Department of Education, substitute teachers are not contracted workers and are considered part-time employees who can work no more than 6-1/2 hours per day. The Department's part-time workers do not receive job-related benefits," Ms. Graham said.

But contrary to Ms. Graham's assertion that substitute teachers don't work more than 6.5 hours daily, Ms. Griffin told The Consortium that they work through lunch as they're part of clubs, attend department meetings, help students with tutorials and some are even part of Elena's famous Rocketry Club.

Ms. Graham said substitute teachers wishing to gain professional staff certification and work as full-time educators must adhere to the rigorous requirements set forth for all certified teachers by the Virgin Islands Board of Education (BOE). She further stated that all full-time teachers employed by DOE, whether recruited locally or from abroad, have met BOE requirements for certification; contrary to Ms. Griffin's claim that foreign teachers are given a 3-5 year period to meet all qualifications.

"It is important to note that 95% of the Department's substitute pool are retired teachers who have returned to assist the Department with its classroom needs, of which the Department is most grateful," Ms. Graham went on. "Public school substitute teachers are compensated at a rate of \$22 per hour; more than the hourly rate of a full-time qualified teacher with eight years of experience, whose hourly rate amounts to \$19.04."

Ms. Griffin's biggest gripe, however, is the fact that she's had to go through these lengths just to get the money that she worked for.

"I love my school and we all are a big family," she said. "The fact I'm being ran around to be paid is the issue. And on top of that, being disrespected by the person who actually does payroll because I am "frustrating" her.

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