

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Dept. Of Education Says It Will Run Out Of Lunch For Students By February; Asks Senate For \$4.6 Million

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ST. THOMAS -- The Department of Education said on Wednesday that it is quickly running out of money to purchase school lunches for students and would need an infusion of some \$4.6 million dollars to get through the school year.

That's according to Department of Education officials, who gave testimony during a Committee on Education and Workforce Development hearing at the Earl B. Ottley Legislative Hall here. Testimony specific to lack of funds for the lunch program was given by St. Thomas/St. John Insular Superintendent of School Dionne Wells-Hedrington, who started by stating that the program is currently in a crisis.

"The Virgin Islands School Food Authority (SFA) is in crisis for fiscal year 2016," she began. "We are now in the second quarter of the fiscal year, and the St. Thomas-St. John District has depleted 86 percent of their budget; and the St. Croix District has depleted 61 percent of their budget." In fact, the urgency of the matter demands that an appropriation by the Senate be made this month, according to Deputy Education Commissioner Debra Gottlieb.

According to Mrs. Wells-Hedrington, by mid-February, both districts will have depleted their commodities and will not have adequate funding to purchase more food. She highlighted some of the reasons for the quickly depleting funds as changes made to the program in recent years by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

"For breakfast, there must be a minimum of four items. Each child must have three options, one of which must be a fruit. For lunch, each child must have five items, and one must either be a fruit or vegetable. Although milk is optional, it must be made available," Mrs. Wells-Hedrington made known. "In any given week, five different vegetables must be served. Substitutions are no longer allowed in the vegetable subgroups, and fruits can no longer be used to be replaced vegetables. If all components are not available in the correct proportions, the meal will not be reimbursed."

And there has been a drastic reduction in the participation rate due to the nutritionally balanced initiatives that were implemented in 2012, causing the program to make less money on meals served, the superintendent said.

She also revealed that entitlement funds have reduced, which has resulted in far fewer commodity items like vegetables being subsidized. "For example, no vegetable was received under the entitlement for fiscal year 2016. "However, the portion sizes of the vegetable served to each child has increased in the last year; increasing the quantity to be purchased," Mrs. Wells-Hedrington added.

Prices of commodities have increased by 27 percent, she said, with milk, a federally mandated component for the meal program, seeing a 16 to 27 percent increase, "depending on the flavors purchased." She also revealed that indirect cost had increased exponentially from fiscal year 2014 to 2016."

"There are stringent federal guidelines that must be followed in order to continue to receive funding from USDA. In order for the school food authority to continue to provide this service, they will need funds to operate for the remainder of the year," Mrs. Wells-Hedrington said.

She said the St. Thomas-St John District School Food Authority is requesting an additional \$2,462,000, while the St. Croix School Food Authority is requesting \$2,194,974 -- amounting to roughly \$4.6 million.

Education Commissioner Sharon McCollum, tying the problem to management and the difficulty in retaining committed employees to run the program at DOE, said the department had made "significant changes" to management that would help prevent a repeat of the situation, and put an end to the way it has been ran in past years.