

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Dept. Of Education Now Asking For \$7.2 Million In Extra Funding For Lunch Program, Substitute Teachers

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Ernice Gilbert **February 09, 2016**



ST. THOMAS -- The Virgin Islands Department of Education (D.O.E.) brought its full armament to a Committee on Education and Workforce Development meeting at the Earl B. Ottley Legislative Hall on Monday. The committee had requested that D.O.E. explain in detail [why it needed \\$4.6 million](#) in additional funding for the school lunch program to supplement the remainder of the school year, as it said food was set to diminish by February.

It was also revealed by Office of Management and Budget (O.M.B.) Director Nellon Bowry that D.O.E. would need an additional \$3.4 million to pay substitute teachers, and \$600,000 for the department's territory-wide literacy initiative, a move that comes as a direct result of Governor Kenneth Mapp's call during his State of the Territory address last month, that an initiative be forged to raise the literacy percent among third-graders in the territory. And the amount for the school lunch program was decreased to \$3.2 million; as Education officials said a reassessment of the shortfall, as well as better menu planning had resulted in considerable savings -- bringing the department's new total, which is supported by O.M.B., to \$7.2 million.

Education officials went through charts that were intended to clearly explain what had caused the food lunch deficit. They blamed the hemorrhaging of funds on four main areas: management problems that were inherited from the prior administration, the federal government's strict regulation of the program, the territory's geographical location and the lack of supplemental funding to cushion the program, according to St. Thomas-St. John School District Superintendent Dion Wells-Hendrington.

Committee Chairman Sen. Jean Forde, highlighting the issues already listed by testifiers, asked for further explanation.

D.O.E. Commissioner Sharon McCollum said that a combination of insufficiencies led to this point, calling the situation a "perfect storm." She said the department has formulated a corrective action plan that gives guideline as to what direction it should take, and said the late submission of paperwork to facilitate a fluid process has been another complication.

"I would say that we have hired individuals that can cook, but are not necessarily the professional level that we want them to be," she said.

As the department explained during the January meeting, officials reiterated the stringent federal standards mandating that each meal include a minimum serving 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 explained during the January meeting. "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."

Other steps being taken to correct the errors, according to D.O.E. officials, include [HACCP food training](#), with workshops on how the food should be prepared and served. Ms. McCollum said the department has also moved away from training groups to focus on individuals, part of which entails "going into the schools one-by-one so that the training is more personalized." However, her assessment was in direct conflict with Territorial School Lunch Trainer Esther Lynch-Isaak's testimony, who said that group training were ongoing.

Senators were not convinced that enough steps were being taken to swiftly allay the problems in the program. Senator Kenneth Gittens highlighted bureaucracy, including six

directors at the top whose functions were either muddled or the same. And Senator Kurt Violet was disappointed that all directors were from St. Thomas. To strengthen his point, Mr. Violet referred to a chart provided by D.O.E. that showed 61.3 percent of federal dollars being reimbursed to the St. Thomas district, compared to 79 percent to St. Croix.

"The numbers are glaring that there are serious issues when it comes to the St. Thomas-St. John district -- some 18 percentage points in reimbursement -- but I'm seeing all of these [managers] on St. Thomas," Mr. Violet said.

Ms. McCollum said St. Thomas twice ran out of milk; causing the district to lose federal reimbursement dollars; however Mr. Violet was not satisfied, and commented that if the St. Croix district has been performing better in recouping federal funds, officials of said district should have been considered for top positions. He eased on the commissioner a bit, though, stating that some of the problems that were being discussed started before her time. Nonetheless, he said, they should not continue.

As for the \$3.4 million needed for substitute teachers -- a problem that arose because O.M.B. did not include funding for substitutes in its budget, but rather depended on a line item that has since been depleted to fund the program -- it remained unclear whether senators would provide the funding.

The Committee on Finance will meet next week, and Education officials are expected to give further testimony.

Senators present at Monday's meeting include Senators Violet, Novelle Francis, Terrence Nelson, Forde, Myron Jackson, Justin Harrigan, Gittens and Tregenza Roach.