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Education Commissioner: Officials Still Weighing Final Plan for School Reopening; 100 Percent Online Learning is 'Last Option'

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Department of Education Commissioner Racquel Berry Benjamin spoke during a Facebook live Thursday and confirmed what Governor Albert Bryan told the Consortium during his Monday press briefing: that [plans have yet to be finalized as to what the reopening of schools will look like in August](#).

She did say with certainty that school buildings will reopen, though to what capacity remains undetermined. Her explanation was part of what D.O.E. said would be a series of talks led by the commissioner on the reopening of schools on Facebook Live, and it came hours after a story published by the Consortium on Thursday quoting Mr. Bryan, who told the publication when asked about the reopening of schools, that he did not want to be responsible for a "pandemic

breakout" in schools, yet at the same time valued the importance of in-person learning.

"It is a definite that our school buildings will re-open and I think it's also understood that school will look different from what we know it to be," Ms. Berry-Benjamin said. "We have explored a variety of options, such as one hundred percent online learning or a blended/hybrid model of online and in-person learning. The model that will be used will be decided at the appropriate time."

She described the initial return to school campuses as a "soft opening" to help students and staff get acclimated to the changes that will be implemented, according to the Dept. of Education's release.

"This will give us the opportunity to go through the necessary processes and procedures with our students so they are able to learn the new norm on their campuses, such as how to greet each other and their teachers while socially distancing because of COVID-19," Ms. Berry-Benjamin said, according to D.O.E.

As for 100 percent online instruction, which was implemented in March when the territory's schools closed due to the coronavirus, Ms. Berry-Benjamin said it is the last option the Department would consider for the upcoming school year.

"We will use this option only if we have no other choice due to the spread of the coronavirus in our community at that time," the commissioner said. "That would be our last option because we want our students, particularly our youngest learners, to be in our schools interacting with their teachers for their educational needs."

Close to \$20 million in CARES Act funding has been allocated to the V.I. Department of Education from Congress in response to COVID-19. The funds, said Ms. Berry-Benjamin, will be distributed to both school districts, including non-public schools, to secure a range of products and services.

"Some of the most important uses of those funds are to purchase the necessary technology for our students and teachers, as well as to purchase personal protective equipment, such as sanitizers, soap dispensers and masks," she said. "Mental health counseling and other related services will also be secured to ensure the overall health and wellness of our students."

The commissioner noted that the CDC has issued specific guidelines that govern the number of students that can ride in a school bus at a given time, as well as that student meals would be served in disposable containers and eaten in their classrooms.

Within the next week, D.O.E. said it will issue a series of surveys to assess the needs of teachers, parents and students.

Weekly updates on the reopening of public schools and other Department of Education announcements will be made at 3:30 p.m. Wednesdays on the Department's Facebook page.