

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Dept. Of Education Has Received 'Hundreds Of Requests' For Student Transcripts As Families Move Stateside

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ST. THOMAS -- The Virgin Islands Department of Education, which was already struggling to retain teachers, maintain schools badly in need of repair, and keep essential curriculum in place because of the lack of funds, has found itself in a precarious position following Hurricanes Irma and Maria, with the department receiving hundreds of requests for student transcripts, as families move to the U.S. mainland seeking better education for their children and better lives for themselves.

The requests for transcripts revelation was made by Dept. of Education Commissioner Sharon McCollum during a Senate hearing in St. Thomas on Wednesday. There, Ms. McCollum also revealed that the department, which had 123 teaching vacancies before the storms, had lost an additional 150 employees.

The department has struggled to retain teachers, according to Ms. McCollum, who in August blamed the exodus on the territory's inability to compete with U.S. jurisdictions.

"Applicants' interest quickly dissipates when they attempt to negotiate incentives and salary schedules. Our department is simply at a disadvantage and unable to compete with school districts nationally in regards to monetary compensation," Ms. McCollum acknowledged [during an August hearing](#). She said D.O.E.'s competitiveness "has to be weighed by the lack of typical incentives offered nationally. For example relocation reimbursements, nationally competitive starting salaries and schedules, and signing bonuses; our inability to provide all typical incentives hinders our attractiveness; comparative to other school districts, and contributes to our inability to compete for the limited pool of applicants locally and nationally."

The passage of the two Cat 5 storms has compounded an already dire problem. Ms. McCollum revealed during Wednesday's hearing that of the 13,000 students in the territory, only half had returned to school. The department expects the number to increase as more schools open, but the timeline of reopening was hard to pin as many were condemned and are in need of repair. During Governor Kenneth Mapp's Oct. 18 press briefing, Ms. McCollum [announced that 7 schools on St. Croix](#) -- Pearl B. Larsen Elementary School, Lew Muckle Elementary School, Alfredo Andrews Elementary School, Eulalie Rivera Elementary School, Alexander Henderson Elementary School, John H. Woodson Junior High School and Elena L. Christian Junior High School -- had been condemned. On St. Thomas, the Addelita Cancryn Junior High and the Emanuel Benjamin Oliver Elementary schools were also condemned. The Gladys Abraham Elementary School, although not condemned, will not be operational this school year.

With a number of schools condemned and the difficulty in conducting successful double sessions -- students get only 4 hours of school daily -- parents have been thinking long and hard about their options and the benefits, along with the challenges of moving to the U.S. mainland.

Thousands of residents have taken the plunge. According to Dept. of Tourism Commissioner Beverly Nicholson-Doty, speaking during one of Mr. Mapp's press briefings, nearly 5,000 people left the territory on mercy cruises and flights following the storms, 1,700 of which were tourists. That number have climbed since the airports reopened, with the decision of some being based on their children's education, according to multiple conversations The Consortium has had with parents.

Even with the schools currently open, problems persist. Carol Callwood, president of the St. Thomas-St. John Federation of Teachers, said during the Wednesday hearing that the schools currently housing students were not ready for learning. "I questioned the safety of the job sites with the presence of mold and the impact that it will have on the health and staff of our students," she said.

Rosa Soto-Thomas, president of the St. Croix Federal of Teachers, told The Consortium on Monday that while the Dept. of Education was doing its best to get schools reopened, the facilities still suffered mold, and that mosquitoes had become a problem. At the time, The Consortium spoke with Mrs. Soto-Thomas at the Juanita Gardine Elementary School, which is hosting double sessions with Gardine students and Pearl B. Larsen children. She said multiple classrooms at that site were condemned because they posed severe health risks.

Shawna Williams, a mother of two boys who attend the Juanita Gardine Elementary School, said while she was happy that her children were back in class, she was concerned about the double sessions and the impact the setup would have on her boys' education. "They are getting some education, so let's thank God. But I think they should have a full day," Ms. Williams said. Her boys are in the second and third grades, critical learning stages and Ms. Williams hoped her sons would be receiving the adequate lessons. "They are like sponges at that age, and 4 hours isn't enough," she said.

The Dept. of Education did not give a timeline to parents as to how long the double session setup would remain in place, which concerned Ms. Williams. "I just feel that they should try working on the schools fast. My sons miss school. My niece, my nephew, my sister -- they all miss school and 4 hours is not enough," Ms. Williams said.

She gave the Mapp administration and the Dept. of Education until the end of November to introduce a better solution.