

The Virgin Islands Consortium

DeVos Describes Federal Assistance As 'Process, Not Event,' During First Visit To USVI

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ST. THOMAS -- U.S. Department of Education Secretary Betsy DeVos landed in the U.S. Virgin Islands and stayed for two hours in St. Thomas on Wednesday, where she met with a host of students and local education officials, toured some damaged learning facilities, and listened to the concerns of seniors, according to the V.I. Department of Education (D.O.E.).

D.O.E. said Ms. DeVos, along with Assistant Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education Jason Botel and her chief of staff, Joshua Venable, visited the Charlotte Amalie High School (C.A.H.S.) and dialogued with the school's administration about the recovery efforts and challenges they now face as educators.

The administration voiced concerns about the senior year experience and the effect split-session schedules have on students' ability to adequately prepare for standardized tests. Representatives from the school's math, social studies, science and English departments expressed the difficulties they face without complete access to the internet and technology, D.O.E. said.

D.O.E. Chief of Staff Anthony Thomas also attended the brief session with Ms. DeVos, and advocated for the construction of new schools in the territory, citing what D.O.E. said were eleven closed and condemned sites. Dr. Maria Melendez-Tirado, director of federal grants, also chimed in and thanked the U.S. Department of Education team for working with D.O.E. to secure emergency funding for education-related services.

St. Thomas – St. John District Deputy Superintendent Racquel Berry-Benjamin and C.A.H.S. Principal Alcede Edwards, led Ms. DeVos on a walking tour of the school's campus where she saw some of the damages and classroom deficiencies from Hurricanes Irma and Maria. Ms. DeVos also greeted students and educators during the afternoon session while learning about the various extracurricular activities disrupted by the storm's impact, to include sports and music education.

Following the campus tour, the secretary sat in the midst of C.A.H.S. students and listened as they spoke about their challenges. Seniors voiced their concerns about the connectivity issues prohibiting them from filling out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), and juniors inquired about colleges' willingness to assist students from disaster areas.

According to D.O.E., Ms. DeVos encouraged the students to remain positive and work hard for the remainder of the school year, and she assured them that the U.S. Department of Education would make concessions where it can for students hailing from disaster-stricken areas like the U.S. Virgin Islands. Notably, Ms. DeVos described federal assistance as "a process, not an event."

The U.S. D.O.E. awarded the local education department a \$2 million Project SERV grant to assist with education-related services for public and non-public schools in the wake of the two hurricanes. Project SERV (School Emergency Response to Violence), is authorized under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and can be used for activities that help state and local educational agencies manage practical problems caused by a traumatic or violent event, to include mental health services, overtime for teachers, counselors, security, payment of substitute teachers and emergency transportation.

According to [The New York Times](#), for years Ms. DeVos traveled the country — and opened her checkbook — as she worked as a conservative advocate to promote the expansion of voucher programs that allow parents to use taxpayer funds to send their children to private and religious schools.

A detailed look at the first six months of Ms. DeVos's tenure as the secretary of education — based on a 326-page calendar tracking her daily meetings — demonstrates that she continues to focus on those programs as well as on charter schools, the Times said.

Her calendar is sprinkled with meetings with religious leaders, leading national advocates of vouchers and charter schools, and players involved in challenging state laws that limit

the distribution of government funds to support religious or alternative schools, the publication wrote.

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