

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Dept. Of Education Continues To Lose Teachers As Vacancies Climb To 137; Double Sessions May Continue Through 2018-19 School Year

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ST. THOMAS -- The V.I. Department of Education (D.O.E.) was already struggling to retain educators before Hurricanes Irma and Maria struck the territory in September. Teachers, some of the hardest workers and most indelible to the community, must deal with a starting salary in the USVI of \$32,000, and even those who make substantially more, must factor in the deductions that greatly shrink their pay.

D.O.E. Commissioner Sharon McCollum, testifying before the Committee on Education, Youth and Recreation, gave lawmakers an example of what she's dealt with relative to

teachers resigning. She said one teacher who recently parted ways with D.O.E., wrote, "After much thought and trial in trying to make ends meet here, I must inform you of my intent to depart from the D.O.E. .. This is by no means a hasty decision, however, due to the fact I have \$500 coming out of each paycheck, I can no longer keep up with my bills."

Teachers and other government employees see deductions from their biweekly checks from Social Security, Medicaid, Federal income tax, GERS and health insurance. For some, the reduction of funds is unsustainable in an economy whose cost of living is already high.

In August 2017, Ms. McCollum said D.O.E. had lost 80 teachers. Back then, [she blamed](#) the resignations on competition from mainland teaching institutions: "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.

But Hurricanes Irma and Maria exacerbated an already critical problem. As of Wednesday, D.O.E. had a total of 137 teaching vacancies; 47 in the St. Croix District and 90 in the St. Thomas-St. John District. Since August 2017, D.O.E. experienced another 60 separations: 17 teachers from the STTJ District and 13 from the STX District, and the remaining 30 in support staff. "The Department is currently utilizing the substitute pool, which has a total of 150 individuals; 62 in the STX district and 88 in the STTJ district," Ms. McCollum said. The Department also saw a decline in student enrollment of 2,300, although D.O.E. expects the number to normalize back to the previous year's level during the 2018-19 school year. The fulfillment of that expectation, however, remains in questions, as Ms. McCollum stated in October 2017 that D.O.E. had been receiving [hundreds of requests for student transcripts](#), as families moved to the U.S. mainland seeking better education for their children and better lives for themselves following the storms.

To make up for the diminishing number of educators, D.O.E. uses a substitute pool of teachers which consists of approximately 150 educators -- 62 in the St. Croix District and 88 in the St. Thomas-St. John District.

Aside from the department's woes with retaining teachers, D.O.E. is confronting another major issue. Ms. McCollum told lawmakers that the current double session system that D.O.E. has been utilizing following the devastating storms -- which sees educational facilities being used by multiple schools -- may continue into the 2018-19 school year, as it will take six months to procure and install modular units, but because the order will be managed through the Federal Emergency Management Agency's Public Assistance Program, which is 100 percent reimbursable, it will have to be processed through the local Department of Property and Procurement, which could add additional months to the process. Roughly 8 months remain before the 2018-17 school year, and D.O.E. has six months to act on the modular units. If it allows the window to expire before it secures the units, some of the cost will be passed on to the local government.

Lawmakers were not pleased to hear that double sessions may continue through the upcoming school year, and they asked Ms. McCollum to expedite the process.

There are currently 10 abandoned schools in the territory; seven in the St. Croix District (STX): (1) Lew Muckel, (2) Pearl B. Larsen, (3) Eulalie Rivera, (4) Arthur A. Richards, (5) Elena Christian, (6) John Woodson and (7) Alexander Henderson; and 3 schools in the St. Thomas/St. John District: (1) Addelita Cancryn Junior High School, (2) E. Benjamin Oliver Elementary School, and (3) Guy Benjamin Community Center.

The Mapp administration has requested \$750 million to repair and rebuild 6 school facilities, funds that have not yet been made available, and it remains to be seen how much the territory will receive from the federal government once the assessments are completed.

As for the schools that were damaged but remain functional and are being utilized, D.O.E. is having difficulty procuring materials and supplies, as well as contractors to do the work. "The most significant challenge the department is facing across the territory is scarcity of materials and A&E contractors; roof damage continues to allow moisture into the schools, facilitating the exacerbated growth of mold," Ms. McCollum said.