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Dept. of Education Takes School Virtual-Only Until at Least February 2021

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V.I. Department of Education officials made known Thursday that public schools territory-wide will open for the new school year virtually, citing as its reason a meeting with the V.I. Department of Health this week where D.O.H. advised the all-virtual setup because of the rising number of Covid-19 cases in the territory.

D.O.E. Commissioner Racquel Berry-Benjamin announced the new plan during a Committee on Education and Workforce Development Thursday, where senators sought answers to a number of questions. Also giving testimony was the V.I. Board of Education, which said it told D.O.E. officials that in-person learning was not recommended, though the board's reasons for the recommendation was a [lack of preparatory action](#) by D.O.E.

The Dept. of Education's prior plan, which still has to be updated, called for a hybrid of in-person and distance learning, as well as a distance learning-only setup. With the new model announced, Mrs. Berry-Benjamin said D.O.E. will release the updated plan to the public once it's ready.

"Given the current status with the virus in the territory with cases steadily on the rise, both agencies have agreed that the V.I.D.E. should begin the 2020-2021 school year with all students learning from home," the commissioner testified Thursday. "As such, there will be no in-person instruction during the first semester of VI Public Schools, from Sept. 2020 to February [2021]."

Mrs. Berry-Benjamin said if the territory's Covid-19 cases were to see declines, "we anticipate reintroducing in-person instruction to our plan for the second semester..."

The commissioner said the decision to implement 100 percent virtual learning was made coincidentally the same week D.O.E. officials were scheduled to testify at the Committee on Education and Workforce Development. Additionally, Mrs. Berry-Benjamin said a series of meetings have been scheduled with the Board of Education beginning August 10 to discuss the new strategy in detail.

Technological tools such as Chromebook laptops will not be available for up to 45 days. D.O.E. had received its Cares Act funds of \$19.9 million in June, but the company D.O.E. has been paying roughly \$3 million for services such as payments processing, named [Munis](#), was closed from June 22 to July 12, hindering D.O.E.'s ability to order important items in a timely fashion, the commissioner said. D.O.E. is looking to secure over 3,000 Chromebook laptops.

"I'm so disappointed that we're paying an entity \$3 million to assist the Virgin Islands and they close the system and tie your hands for weeks," said Senator Kurt Vialet.

"How are our children going to learn virtually if they don't have the tools to learn virtually? How dare the third-party do that to the Virgin Islands. These are the areas we have to mandate; they're supposed to be serving us, not we serving them," he said.

The department plans on spending \$1.4 million out of the \$19.9 million Cares Act funds for janitorial services. However, Mr. Vialet was against the department's plan to hire a contractor to provide cleaning services which could cost \$1 million. Instead, he contended that custodial workers should be hired by D.O.E. and be on school campuses daily to constantly clean. "I don't know if I agree with this contractual services for cleaning companies, because you need custodians who are going to be at the school all day cleaning those restrooms. You need them assigned by those restrooms to clean all day, not to clean at the end of the day. We need full-time individuals, and even if it's a 2-year period that these individuals are able to work for until we get over the Covid, we need to have bodies on the ground," said Mr. Vialet, vice chair of the Committee on Education and Workforce Development, chairman of the powerful Finance Committee and a former principal of two schools on St. Croix.

Relative to the virtual learning setup, D.O.E. officials said teachers will be required to go to their classrooms and follow instructions that will be provided for teachers and students. The education department will be utilizing platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams to achieve its virtual learning goals.

Mr. Vialet suggested to education officials that D.O.E. should consider providing certain classes such as Math and English on certain days, instead of the current setup that sees students switching at least 4 subjects per day. The idea is to streamline the process and keep the attention

of students. It was not certain whether D.O.E. would heed the advice.

"We are going into a new realm; we need to be clear as to how it's going to work so parents know exactly what to do," Mr. Violet said.

The department is conducting a technology survey which started earlier this week. Mrs. Berry-Benjamin said the survey will give D.O.E. insight on how prepared homes are in terms of tools needed for learning, so as to meet the current need. She said once the ordered items arrive in the territory, each student will receive a Chromebook laptop.

Senator Marvin Blyden inquired about whether adequate internet access would be available, and Mrs. Berry-Benjamin said the department had previously reached out to Viya, which at the time said it would be able to supply the amount of portable internet devices D.O.E. had requested. In light of the new plan, the department will have to re-engage Viya to determine whether the firm can meet the new demand.

For Pre-K students, D.O.E. is looking at models that suggest 45 minutes of instruction where the teacher engages the student for 30 minutes, and the remaining 15 minutes are set aside for off-screen instructional time. D.O.E. officials said the department tested the model during the summer time, where students received a total of 2 hrs per day, split between teacher-student engagement and off-screen instructional time.