

The Virgin Islands Consortium

D.O.E. Continues To Face Daunting Problem: Teachers Are Leaving For Better Opportunities In U.S.

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The Department of Education continues to face a long-standing problem with no end in sight: the separation of teachers from the territory for better opportunities on the mainland, where multiple incentives and better salaries have enticed educators exhausted with the U.S. Virgin Islands' stagnant compensation structure for educators.

In testimony to be given to the Committee on Finance today, D.O.E. Commissioner Sharon McCollum will testify that the department simply can't compete with the offerings

of the mainland, and therefore has no solid strategy to fix the problem.

According to Ms. McCollum's testimony, which [has been posted](#) on the Legislature's website, as of June 29, 2018, D.O.E. had a total of 101 teaching vacancies, 60 in the St. Thomas-St. John District and 41 in the St. Croix District. Since April 13, 2018, the department has lost 18 teachers.

The upshot of losing teachers has been mitigated by D.O.E.'s aggressive hiring of University of the Virgin Islands students, Ms. McCollum said. The effort has resulted in a total of 53 hires: 25 in the St. Croix district and 28 in the St. Thomas-St. John district (16 were 2017 graduates). The downside, however, is that a limited number of applicants exist both locally and nationally, according to Ms. McCollum, as the teaching profession has seen a decline in interest.

"Applicant's interest quickly dissipates when they attempt to negotiate incentives and salary schedules," reads Ms. McCollum's testimony. "Our department is simply at a disadvantage and unable to compete with school districts nationally in regards to monetary compensation."

She added that 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; annual raises annual raises, and signing bonuses," Ms. McCollum's testimony says. "All these factors exacerbates our attractiveness nationally compared to other school districts, and contributes to our inability to compete for the limited pool of applicants.

"For this reason, the department relies exclusively on the substitute pool to mitigate the inadequate staffing levels for critical positions including nurses, teachers, and professional staff essential to the department," the testimony says. "Teacher shortages not only place tremendous strain on our classrooms, but facilitate a further deterioration of the work environment by contributing to additional challenges for our staff. We must make every effort to invest resources in the acquisition of our JI Visa personnel and our Substitute Teacher Pool."

Ms. McCollum's testimony relative to human resources has been almost the same for the past two years. In fact, [the language is nearly identical](#): "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 the 2017 budget hearing cycle. She said then that 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."