

The Virgin Islands Consortium

D.O.E. Continues To Lose Teachers As Educators Balk At G.E.R.S. Deductions, USVI Cost Of Living

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If you've been a reader on The Consortium over the years, the following story will most likely serve as déjà vu: The Department of Education continues to lose teachers who leave the territory's education system to seek better opportunities on the U.S. mainland and elsewhere, including more attractive benefits. The Government Employees' Retirement System, which accounts for a sizable deduction from the salaries of local government employees, has also been a big turnoff, leading D.O.E. to continue its seemingly losing battle of retaining educators.

That's according to D.O.E. Commissioner Nominee Racquel Berry-Benjamin, who relayed the gloomy but [familiar news](#) to lawmakers during a Committee on Education and

Workforce Development hearing Wednesday.

Between August 31, 2018 and February 2019, a total of 91 teachers left D.O.E. That's more than the same period last year, when 80 teachers left the territory. Exacerbating an already daunting problem, 54 teachers have been out on sick leave since January, complaining of mold and other issues caused by dilapidating learning facilities. The department is using the substitute pool of teachers, which consists of mostly retired educators, to help lessen the crisis. However, the pool of retired educators continue to diminish with each passing year: In 2018, [there were 150 educators](#) who made up the substitute pool, with 62 in the St. Croix District and 88 in the St. Thomas-St. John District. Today, however, there are only 53 teachers who make up the substitute pool -- a decline of 64.67 percent year-over-year -- with 28 in the St. Thomas-St. John District and 25 in St. Croix, according to Ms. Berry-Benjamin.

Even as the department continues to hemorrhage teachers, the D.O.E. commissioner nominee said the department has had a hard time with recruitment, a problem she blamed in part on the local government's and the territory's economic woes. "[D.O.E.] is still faced with challenges partially due to our central government and economic environment," Ms. Berry-Benjamin said. Other issues hampering successful recruitment of additional teachers, she said, include the cost of living in the territory; a decline of individuals entering the teaching profession locally and nationally; the state of the Government Employee Retirement System (GERS); affordable housing; and an inability to compete with other jurisdictions offering monetary incentives for their teacher shortage areas, including sign-on bonuses and refer-a-friend programs.

Even the program to attract Puerto Rico educators to the territory -- a once promising effort that sought to take advantage of the Spanish-speaking island's mass exodus of its people because of economic hardship -- has failed to provide encouraging results. "Through our Puerto Rico recruitment efforts, [D.O.E.] interviewed a total of 20 candidates: fifteen in July of 2017 and five in December of 2018. Applicants from Puerto Rico interviewed were librarians and teachers with backgrounds in science, elementary education, special education, art, and ESL [English as a Second Language]. However, only a total of three applicants signed job offers and are currently working," Ms. Berry-Benjamin made known.

Faced with little options, D.O.E. has been conducting a territory-wide assessment of class sizes to determine which ones can be merged.

"While our preferred choice would be to have smaller class sizes, our current reality does not allow us to do so," Ms. Berry-Benjamin said.