

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Leaked Bryan Administration Plan For Public Schools On St. Croix Ignites Uproar

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ST. CROIX -- "We are currently witnessing the dismantling of public education in the territory by the Bryan-Roach administration," [reads a post](#) on the Facebook page of the St. Croix Federation of Teachers. The strongly-worded post reflected the ire of the federation's president, Rosa Soto-Thomas, after she received a leaked document created by the Department of Education showing sweeping changes coming to the public school system in the St. Croix District. Mrs. Soto-Thomas said she was disturbed for many reasons, one of which is the Bryan administration's broad action taken without the input of stakeholders -- parents, teachers and the unions.

"I am livid with this Department of Education," the union president said in an interview with The Consortium on Tuesday. "I remember you interviewed Carlos McGregor... I had a meeting with the commissioner of Education and her team on April 24 via teleconference." Mrs. Soto-Thomas said union members were given a few minutes to speak during the meeting. Then, Mrs. Soto-Thomas said she asked Racquel Berry-Benjamin, the D.O.E. commissioner nominee, whether big changes were coming to the department, to which she said Ms. Berry-Benjamin reassured her that the changes were not major.

2019—2020

**ST. CROIX DISTRICT
SCHOOLS**

Pearl B. Larsen (K-8)

Juanita Gardine (K-8)

Arthur Richards (K-8)

Eulalie R. Rivera (K-8)

Lew Muckle (K-6)

Ricardo Richards (K-6)

Alfredo Andrews (K-6)

Claude O. Markou (K-6)

John H. Woodson (7-8)

St. Croix Central High School (9-12)

But the changes are significant. According to the leaked document, seen above, the department is looking to consolidate schools, extend the grades of elementary schools, and shut down some schools altogether. Among the schools missing on the list are Elena Christian Junior High School and Alexander Henderson Elementary School.

The list also shows Pearl B. Larsen, Juanita Gardine and Eulalie Rivera -- all originally elementary schools, having students from K through 8th grade. Currently, the schools are from K through 6th grade. Also on the K-8 list is Arthur A. Richards, a junior high school which is also housing Alexander Henderson students.

The changes, made without stakeholders at the table, has invited the angst of parents and teachers alike, along with the American Federation of Teachers Union, St. Croix Chapter.

"They're talking about change course now, I really feel like this is the total dismantling of public education in the territory," Mrs. Soto-Thomas told The Consortium. Her concerns, which included social interaction issues with the students now that younger children will be joining older ones permanently, the ability of teachers to educate larger classrooms with little paraprofessional help, and the need for additional monitors, were echoed by parents.

"You can't put these big junior high school students with the elementary students," said Beverly Mathurin on the federation's Facebook page.

"I want to know who was involved in the decision-making process. Why wasn't this a collective decision? In May, 6th graders are finding out that elementary doesn't end in June. Then Pearl B. students who graduated last year and moved up to junior high will be going back to Pearl B next year? Why is middle school no longer relevant? Why was 9th grade moved to high school to begin with? Was that the beginning stage of this plan?" asked TKC Navarro on the federation's Facebook page.

Department of Education Public Relations head Keva Muller, confirmed that the document was legitimate, that it was leaked, and that D.O.E. officials would be meeting with stakeholders to discuss the changes all this week, including union leaders and senators by the end of the week. Not discussed was why D.O.E. made such sweeping changes without inviting stakeholders to be part of the process.

Government House did not respond to a request for comment.

The Consortium was informed of impending changes coming to St. Croix District schools in April. Specifically, Arthur A. Richards students would be moved to another school for the upcoming school year, while Alexander Henderson, which is currently sharing Arthur A. Richards' campus, would remain on the campus. With this information, this publication spoke with St. Croix Superintendent of Schools, Carlos McGregor, who flatly denied that such changes were being made.

"No truth to that at all. I was quite shocked and surprised when I heard at least two senators called me with the same concerns you have," Mr. McGregor said in April. "As a matter of fact there has been no discussions. Arthur Richards Junior High School will remain intact at its present location."

Mr. McGregor did confirm that meetings were taking place on a plan to restructure the district's schools. But when asked whether stakeholders would be informed after D.O.E. had made its decision on its restructuring plans, or whether they would be involved in the decision-making process, Mr. McGregor said, "Our leadership team will be meeting to discuss just that — how any possible change would be rolled out. We're meeting this week to discuss just that."

D.O.E. has spoken about, though not elaborated on, potential plans to restructure schools because of two issues: the lack of educators. The territory continues to hemorrhage teachers as many balk at the territory's pension system deductions and smile at the lower cost of living and better salaries offered on the U.S. mainland. The second problem is that school population, since the devastating storms of 2017, has decreased. D.O.E. sees an opportunity for territory-wide consolidation, according to Ms. Berry-Benjamin. "While our preferred choice would be to have smaller class sizes, our current reality does not allow us to do so," she said during [a Senate hearing in April](#).

Mrs. Soto-Thomas said she had to speak up because the Bryan administration has taken unilateral action, even though the action affects a number of stakeholders. "I'm livid, I'm past it with them. I asked the superintendent the same question about these changes, and no one answered me. And I'm supposed to continue business as usual with them? No. People's children attend these schools, the union has a contract with the Department of Education. How is this going to pan out?"

Mrs. Soto-Thomas said D.O.E. is going back to a formula that sees teachers educating 30 students at a time. While this move is not against the AFT contract with the department, which allows a maximum of 30 students per classroom, she wondered aloud whether the teachers would have the requisite help from paraprofessionals. "Teachers are overwhelmed with this. They are so upset," she said.

Relative to the new mix of students that would be in the schools all at once if the Bryan administration changes go into effect, Mrs. Soto-Thomas said, "5-year-olds will be there from kindergarten with 12-year-olds, and that's if there are no repeats. Those concerns were there when the children were sharing schools after the hurricanes [of 2017]. The children go through different development stages, including adolescence."

Another major concern was how quickly the administration had made those changes -- just a few months before the 2019-2020 school year, which starts in September.

"Parents are in the dark right now," Mrs. Soto-Thomas said.

The department is now scrambling to inform stakeholders, but many say it's a bit too late, as the changes were made clandestinely, without even consulting those affected the most: parents, teachers, and the unions.