

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Dept. of Education Loses \$90,000 In School Meals For St. Croix District; Career And Technical Education Using Text Books That Are Ten Years Old

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The Committee on Education and Workforce Development convened in St. Thomas on Wednesday to receive testimony on a myriad of challenges the Department of Education (D.O.E.) faces. During the hearing, testimony regarding the child nutrition program surfaced that revealed approximately 40,000 meals from the St. Croix school district, costing \$90,000.00, were disallowed, meaning they were not allowed to be served to students. Testifiers also mentioned another alarming issue: the Career and Technical Education (C.T.E.) students are receiving instruction sourced from ten-year-old textbooks.

The problem with the disallowed meals on St. Croix began in October of 2018, according to D.O.E. officials. It is important to note that there were no disallowed meals in the St. Thomas/St. John district, only St. Croix, and from October until the end of the school year the problem was not rectified. The meals were disallowed on the federal level, which has employees stationed in both districts.

The 40,000 meals were disallowed for reasons that were easily solvable. The nutrition program's focus is ensuring that students receive a well-balanced lunch. Milk and fruit are required for the meals to be in compliance with School Food Authority (S.F.A.).

Senator Kurt Violet asked why the meals were disallowed. Belinda Sanderson, special nutrition director for D.O.E. said that management knows that meals will be disallowed without milk and fruit because they do not meet compliance requirements. Ms. Sanderson said the problem that precipitated the school lunch issue began when the main vendor would not renew their contract.

The main vendor is Merchant's Market. They opted out of the contract because they refused to accept the prior year's cost for this current school year, Ms. Sanderson explained. This left the St. Croix district with no current contract, while the St. Thomas district's contract remained intact.

Both Senators Donna Frett-Gregory and Mr. Violet inquired as to why the department could not source the commodities elsewhere. D.O.E. commissioner, Racquel Berry-Benjamin, explained that Merchant's Market had the commodities and the other vendor's did not. "We couldn't source these items from Plaza and dispense the milk in cups?" Mr. Violet asked incredulously. "What is the plan in the event St. Croix vendors cannot supply the items?" he continued. "We want to hear a plan to determine the path moving forward. We have two months."

Another major problem D.O.E. faces is an outdated supply of textbooks that educators are using as the main source of instruction in career and technical education classes. When the chairwoman questioned Nancy Callwood, state director for C.T.E., about the lack of updated textbooks, her response was that it was a funding issue. "We cannot make everything a funding issue. We need to identify D.O.E.'s needs and our job is to figure out how to address it. If the Legislature does not know there is an issue, we cannot assist," Ms. Frett-Gregory said.

Mrs. Frett-Gregory then challenged the D.O.E. commissioner to lay out summer plans ensuring that the department is prepared and ready for the upcoming school year. "We need to stop saying we are working on it and not saying that we clearly recognize the issues at hand for C.T.E. We are not producing solutions," said Mrs. Frett-Gregory.

Ms. Frett-Gregory then asked Mr. Violet to comment on the issue and he emphatically stated, "The expected response here is that we are putting a textbook committee together for C.T.E. because we realize that our textbooks are ten years old and we are in the process of getting that done and by the end of the summer we will be able to submit the cost of the textbook adoption plan," Mr. Violet said.

Senator Myron Jackson asked the education commissioner to comment on the textbook problem. Her response was that she has been inquiring about it. Mr. Jackson told her

that she has been with the department for some time as well as her testifiers. “Why has the D.O.E. not adequately addressed the deficiencies in C.T.E.?” he asked. The commissioner’s response was that it was a funding issue.

Mrs. Berry-Benjamin continually expressed that what was in place was not working but seemed ill-prepared when faced with hard questions from the body concerning the problems that plague the D.O.E. When senators deferred specific questions to her regarding the department’s dire situation, her responses were evasive at best; solely problem focused and not solution driven.

Mr. Violet was incensed that the territory’s students were entrenched in a system with leaders at the helm who seem unprepared to provide solutions to the problems at hand that will ensure the upcoming school year is one in which they are provided with every necessary resource to have a successful and productive year.

Senators from all districts expressed concern with the state of our D.O.E., and they all shared that their desire is to see students get the quality education they deserve in an environment conducive to learning.