

The Virgin Islands Consortium

School Consolidation Did Not Slow Exodus Of Teachers, D.O.E. Officials Say; Aging Schools And Deferred Maintenance A Growing Problem

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Department of Education Commissioner Racquel Berry-Benjamin [in April said](#) because the territory continued to lose teachers, D.O.E. had no other option but to perform a territory-wide assessment to determine which schools could 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 during a Committee Education and Workforce Development in April. Yet even as the department has moved forward with the consolidation of schools with its K-8 plan, which is set to commence in September, the teacher shortage issue was not mitigated.

D.O.E. officials met in the Committee on Finance on Thursday to defend the department's budget request of roughly \$180 million, an increase of \$7,464,543 year-on-year. During the hearing, Finance Committee Chair Kurt Violet sought to understand why there was no apparent change relative to the shortage of educators, even after the schools had been consolidated. "If we're consolidating schools [and] enrollment has declined, why is there still a large number of vacancies? Asked Mr. Violet. Indeed, Mrs. Berry-Benjamin revealed enrollment was down year-on-year by 150 students.

Nicole Jacobs, D.O.E. director of Human Resources, said when the consolidation was performed, it was mostly focused on the elementary learning level. However, the department continues to see separations in the content and specialized areas, including music, physical education and math and English.

"As of June 21, 2019, the department has a total of 94 teaching vacancies, 50 in the Thomas/St. John District and 44 in the St. Croix District. A total of 107 teachers have separated from the Department for the 2018-2019 school year and 15 who have submitted their notices to separate," revealed Mrs. Berry-Benjamin.

The commissioner also gave some insight as to why the separations continue to occur. "Many teachers who left the [D.O.E.] indicated that they separated for either personal or economic reasons. Furthermore, some school districts provide relocation reimbursements, competitive starting salaries as well as signing bonuses as strategies to attract qualified teachers to their respective district," she said. Her explanation for the continued resignations was the same earlier this year, although she pointed to other problem areas such as the state of the Government Employee Retirement System (G.E.R.S.) and affordable housing.

State of school facilities

D.O.E. Chief Operation Officer Dionne Wells-Hedrington said the territory's old school facilities continue to get worse because of deferred maintenance. "Our schools are in continuous state of deterioration, crumbling under the weight of a \$70 million deferred maintenance before Hurricanes Irma and Maria hit and compounded the needs," she said.

Mrs. Wells-Hendrington said many of the buildings -- 45 in total -- are nearly 50 years old, with a number of them built 70 years ago. And there's one facility constructed in the 1800s still being utilized, she said. To date, a total of \$116,509,712, in FEMA dollars have been obligated for emergency and temporary repair work at school facilities.

The D.O.E. C.O.O. said the department has advocated for timely assessment of its facilities and that Virgin Islands government disaster recovery consultants were working to complete assessments required to begin the process of obligating funds for permanent work.

She added that D.O.E. plans on spending up to \$250,000 in each district this summer with a focus on the K-8 schools on St. Croix. "Throughout the territory, work will include painting, shelving, plumbing repairs, preventive maintenance to roofs and gutters, restroom renovations and cleaning air-conditioners in all schools," Mrs. Wells-Hedrington said. "Additionally, in the St. Thomas/St. John District, the Aviation Building

and the Building B Annex at Charlotte Amalie High School are being retrofitted to help make up for the classrooms lost due to the closure of Building B."

She added, "To accommodate the re-organization of schools on St. Thomas, classrooms at Bertha C. Boschulte Middle School are being prepared to receive additional 6th grade students (who would have attended Yvonne E. Milliner-Bowsky Elementary or Joseph A. Gomez Elementary schools). Other pressing needs that will be addressed as funding permits to include cleaning grease traps and vent hoods, repairing the staff restroom the treatment plant system at Yvonne E. Bowsky Elementary School, to name a few."

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