

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Dept. Of Education Is 'Ghost' As Concerned Residents Question Status Of Schools, Sen. Sarauw Says; State Of Emergency Declaration 'Illegal'

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Senator Janelle Sarauw on Thursday expressed frustration and discontent with the leadership of the Department of Education. The senator, the only lawmaker who voted against the nomination of D.O.E. Commissioner Racquel Berry-Benjamin, described the department's current lack of information on the status of schools as "ghost", leaving concerned residents, parents and guardians of students wondering what should be their next move three weeks before the school year commences.

Ms. Sarauw also chided the Bryan administration for the state of emergency declaration signed by Acting Governor Tregenza Roach on August 2, deeming the action inappropriate for the problem at hand, and also illegal.

"This department has come before the Legislature numerous times within the last few months and concerns were expressed over the lack of apparent planning to ensure that schools territory-wide would be ready for the opening of the 2019-2020 school year. There has also been expressed grievances of the drawdown of federal funds, campus maintenance and what appears to be arbitrary reshuffling and consolidating of schools and administrators. These sentiments have been met with the resounding 'we will be ready' from the leadership of the department," said Ms. Sarauw.

Now, three weeks before school is scheduled to start, "and we are not ready," she stated.

"It is no secret that Charlotte Amalie High School's facility appears unable to accommodate students, and another reshuffling is imminent. With the pending change, Department of Education has yet to inform stakeholders, parents, teachers, or senators of the plan to make necessary accommodations. Instead, the transmittal of sketchy information is through WhatsApp messages on the status of upcoming changes," Ms. Sarauw said.

Use of the Charlotte Amalie High School will either be heavily restricted or altogether condemned for the 2019-2020 school, The Consortium learned [earlier this week](#) from a person with knowledge of the matter. Structural issues affecting the facility are manifold and place students in danger of being hurt.

Department of Education Director of Communications, Cynthia Graham, said D.O.E. knows of the problems at C.A.H.S. and plans on addressing them. "We are aware of the challenges at C.A.H.S., and we are meeting with stakeholders and C.A.H.S. teachers and informing them of the situation. When we have a concrete plan in place, it will be released to the public," Ms. Graham said.

That was two days ago, and the department has yet to reveal its plan.

According to Ms. Sarauw, the situation has prompted an upsurge of calls from stakeholders who are genuinely concerned about the welfare of the state of schools in the territory. "My office is fielding calls every day regarding such. Parents are asking if they should move their children into private school. And to be honest, we do not have an answer," she said.

The senator went on to note that she has spoken to the Bryan administration about the lack of communication related to this and other occurrences at D.O.E., yet no adjustments from the department have been made.

State of Emergency declaration was illegal, Sarauw says

Ms. Sarauw said Mr. Roach's state of emergency declaration was a noble -- but flawed -- remedy to the problems at D.O.E.

"This declaration does little to alleviate the concerns of schools being ready to receive students for the 2019-2020 school year. Furthermore, the lack of adequate planning does

not constitute as the kind of emergency which necessitates the declaration of a state of emergency. The blatant disregard to procedures and rules sets a bad precedent for future declarations. It is the crafting and implementation of a consorted plan with a timely execution by the Department of Education that will facilitate the readiness of our schools," she said.

The senator wrote to Mr. Bryan expressing her concerns with the state of emergency declaration, and also called it illegal. Quoting VI law, Ms. Sarauw wrote, "No state of emergency may continue for longer than 30 unless renewed by the governor. As declared, this state of emergency is effective immediately from the date signed, August 2, 2019 until September 30, 2019, unless sooner modified. The executive order as written for 59 days at the outset violates the law as an executive order can only be for 30 days unless extended. Notwithstanding the noble intent, this declaration of a state of emergency will not address the lack of school maintenance, supplies, etc in time for the start of the upcoming school year. What will address those critical areas of need is a consorted plan and the timely execution of such plan by the leadership of the Department of Education."

Ms. Sarauw is calling on the governor and the leadership of D.O.E to communicate to the public the plans for education, including all issues affecting the system. "Leadership is not about a title, but about the ability to command direction in time of need. Right now, the leadership is ghost," she concluded.

See full letter below:

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