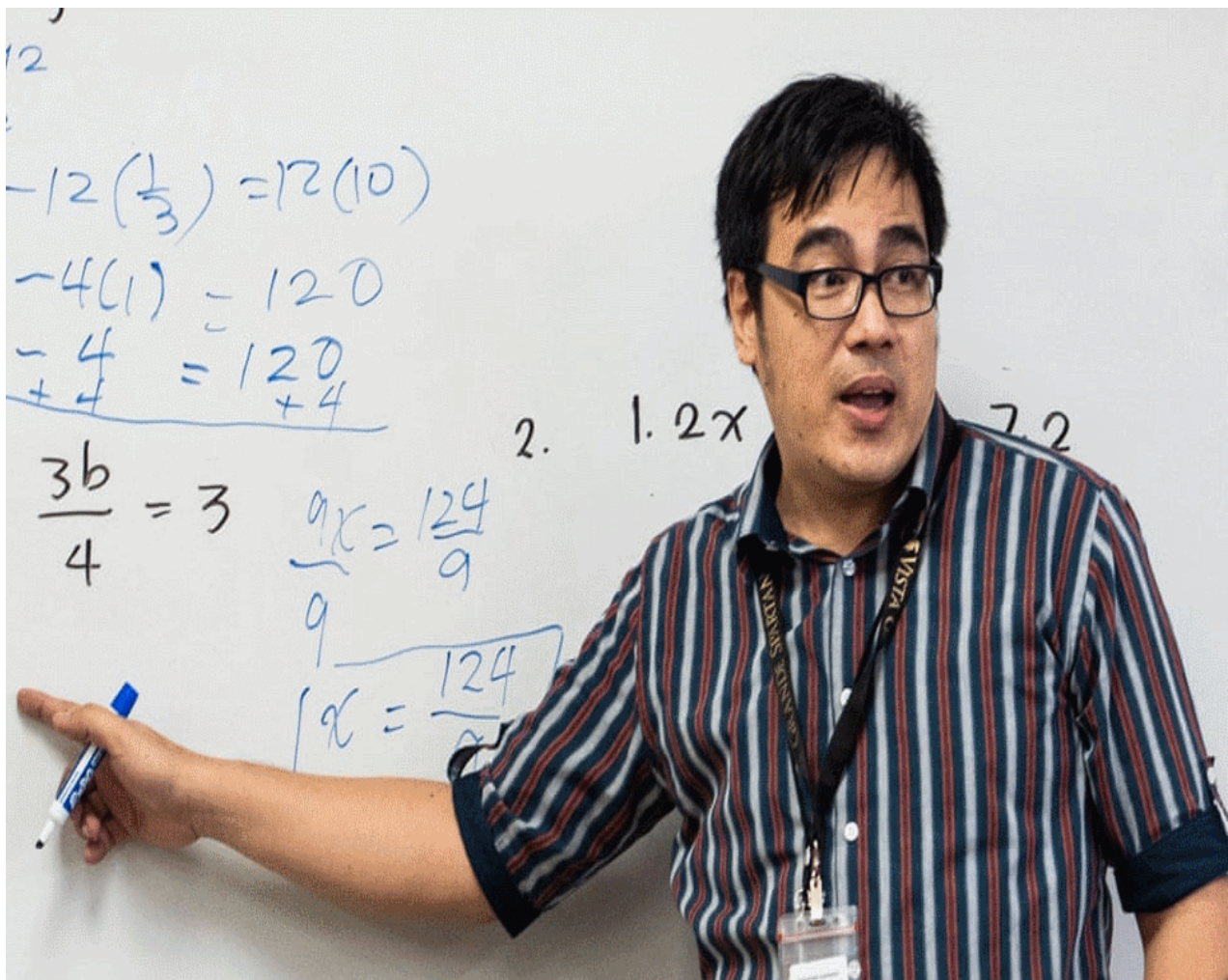


The Virgin Islands Consortium

Up To 20 International Teachers May Be Forced To Leave St. Croix Because Of Late J1 Visa Extension Application

Education / **Published On August 09, 2019 10:58 AM /**

Ernice Gilbert **August 09, 2019**



ST. CROIX -- St. Croix may lose up to 20 Filipino educators who teach critical subjects such as math, science and special education, with 15 of them already denied extension of their J1 Visa, which allowed the educators to live and work in the USVI for a period of 3 years, and allowed for an extension thereafter.

The 15 teachers already denied were told by the U.S. Department of State that their applications were denied because the V.I. Department of Education applied late for the extension. The notice reads: "In accordance with 22 CFR Sec. 62.24 (k) (3), sponsors

must submit their extension request and supporting documentation for the extension period for the exchange teacher. The United States Virgin Islands Department of Education submitted your extension request late (fewer than three months prior to the expiration of your initial authorized stay). As such, we respectfully denied the extension request made on your behalf and explained our decision to your sponsor. Please note that there are no exceptions to this policy."

St. Croix Federal of Teachers President Rosa Soto-Thomas gathered some of the teachers on Tuesday to share their concerns. The teachers told the Consortium that they were not blaming the Department of Education, but pleaded with the department's officials for help, stating that they had done everything on their end to assure that an extension would be granted. Mrs. Soto-Thomas supported the educators, and also called on D.O.E. for help, or at least to communicate with the teachers so that they could know their standing.

The teachers have until the end of September to leave.

While the situation is unfortunate, D.O.E. Communications Director, Cynthia Graham, told The Consortium Tuesday that the department met with the educators long before the three-month window to apply for an extension had arrived. She said a meeting with the educators in both districts notifying them of the process was held in March 2019 (new guidelines from Washington relative to the J1 Visa was received by D.O.E. in February 2019), but the teachers submitted documents late, and even then, some credit cards submitted by the teachers to process the application, which costs \$367, declined, Ms. Graham said, adding that D.O.E. had proof of the late and at times incomplete submission of documents and the declined payment attempts. The teachers, however, have denied that their cards declined. International teachers in the St. Thomas-St. John District submitted documentation in the timeframe required, and have not faced similar issues, Ms. Graham said.



St. Croix Federation of Teachers President Rosa Soto-Thomas, right, stand with Filipino international teachers to discuss denial of J1 Visa extension. (Ernice Gilbert, VIC)

And Mrs. Soto-Thomas was invited to the March meeting on St. Croix, but missed it, Ms. Graham revealed. D.O.E. was still able to brief Mrs. Soto-Thomas on the process relative to the extension of the J1 Visa program.

Ms. Graham said the department has been working to recruit new educators to fill the gap.

This latest issue couldn't come at a worse time for D.O.E. The department is scrambling to come up with a solution for school repairs, and is facing mounting pressure, especially in the St. Thomas-St. John District, to make known its plans for the 2019-2020 school year, as the Charlotte Amalie High School facility [will most likely see restricted use or be](#)

[completely condemned](#) because of safety issues, according to a person familiar with the situation.

And the department was already facing teacher shortages. According to D.O.E. Commissioner Racquel Berry-Benjamin, 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 were out on sick leave as of April 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. As of April, however, there were only 53 teachers who made 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 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.