

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Date For School Reopening Remains Sept. 3, But Facilities Still Not Prepared

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During a Committee on Education and Workforce Development hearing in St. Thomas on Monday, Racquel Berry-Benjamin, commissioner of the Department of Education (D.O.E.), testified that the territory's public schools were on schedule to open September 3. Yet a few minutes later, the commissioner shared that the department was short on maintenance staff and simple maintenance tasks to make schools student-ready were incomplete.

On Friday, Senator Frett-Gregory, chair of the Senate Committee on Education and Workforce Development, joined by Senator Kurt Vialet and a few other senators, toured the territory's schools in both districts. Because of the deplorable conditions the senators

found at some of the schools, Mr. Violet expressed concerns about the feasibility of meeting the September 3 start date.

“Fourteen days out and we still do not have any work taking place. Basic maintenance has not been done. As a matter of fact, the schools look like they're abandoned,” Mr. Violet [told the Consortium](#).”

A good example of incomplete maintenance work was reflected in the condition of the grounds at the St. Croix Central High School. It was unkempt, trash was strewn about the property, and there was no maintenance team in sight actively working towards preparing the school for the opening date, according to Mr. Violet. He expressed disappointment that D.O.E. had told senators things were moving smoothly, even as evidence on the ground said otherwise.

Ms. Benjamin-Berry, however, reiterated that nothing would impact the 2019-2020 school year opening, but she acknowledged on Monday that simple maintenance activities like landscaping, extermination, buffing of floors, and kitchen clean up remained incomplete.

The D.O.E. leader explained that school readiness is relative to the conditions, circumstances, and resources available at the time, and the late arrival of funds resulted in a delayed start to conducting routine summer maintenance. “There is an unreasonable expectation by some for schools to look and function like they once did when their physical deterioration suggests different,” Ms. Berry-Benjamin told lawmakers.

When pressed by Senator Dwayne Degraff on whether D.O.E. had enough maintenance workers, Ms. Berry-Benjamin said the department’s maintenance program lacked the manpower to complete the work. Funding, she said, is also an issue.

The department revealed that \$500,000 has been committed for janitorial services and maintenance of the territory’s schools. However, Mrs. Frett-Gregory said the funds were not sufficient to complete summer maintenance of schools. The chair then chided D.O.E. personnel and expressed that she did not want to see them before the body at year’s end complaining about lack of funding during the 2019-2020 academic year.

Dionne Wells Hedrington, chief operations officer of D.O.E., testified that \$1.8 million has been allotted to ensure ongoing maintenance for the remainder of the school year, and that the department is now able to procure contracts to address reoccurring maintenance.

Projects that will impact school opening will be completed first, Ms. Wells Hedrington explained, with the remainder of the funds assigned to ongoing maintenance projects. The U.S. Dept. of Interior, Office of Insular Affairs has also provided an additional \$4.5 million for ongoing maintenance projects, said Ms. Wells Hedrington.

Department officials told senators that it has been working diligently to ensure new schools are built and D.O.E. will identify rebuilding locations by March 2020.

At that announcement, Mrs. Frett-Gregory shared that she has been working on legislation that requires the Dept. of Education to develop a 20 to 25-year plan concerning how it will phase -in new schools in the territory.

