

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Schools Will Open On Sept. 3, D.O.E. Reaffirms: 'We Are Ready,' Commissioner Says

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Following a Consortium story quoting Senator Janelle Sarauw who toured schools in St. Thomas over the weekend and said that at least three -- Charlotte Amalie High School, the Addelita Cancryn Intermediate & Junior High School and the Lockhart Primary School -- should be delayed by at least three days to allow for more preparation, the Department of Education on Sunday night reaffirmed its Sept. 3 opening school date and maintained that the schools were prepared for the school year.

Ms. Sarauw had visited the schools and even helped with some cleaning at Cancryn.

D.O.E. Commissioner Racquel Berry-Benjamin said members of her team in both districts conducted two days of assessments of the territory's public schools to ensure schools would open on time.

"Our schools were thoroughly assessed in both districts and while there was some minor water damage and debris resulting from the storm, nothing we have found would impact us opening the school year as planned," she said.

In addressing the question of school readiness, Ms. Berry-Benjamin pointed out that it has much more to do with matters that are visible to the public.

"School readiness is beyond fixing infrastructural and maintenance issues, as well as doing landscaping and correcting other challenges that might be readily visible on our campuses," said the commissioner. "While these are important parts of the big picture, school readiness is also ensuring classrooms are adequately staffed, meals are ready to be served, bus and ferry transportation are in place for students, and much more—all of which the Department of Education has secured. We are ready."

Ms. Berry-Benjamin said the Department of Education has had to prioritize projects based on limited funding the department receives in its annual budget. She also said D.O.E. conducts year-round maintenance, a statement that has been challenged by senators who toured the territory's schools in August and found facilities appearing to be in a state of abandonment. "The schools look like they're abandoned," Senator Kurt Vialet said [during a school tour last month](#).

D.O.E. shared some pictures showing preparatory and repair work at a number of the territory's school facilities.













“Given the age of many of our school buildings, we can expect that something will always need improvement,” the commissioner said. “While we would like to, we simply cannot address all of the issues at our schools at once. Therefore, we prioritize our work based on available funding, and level of safety risk to students and staff. We ask for your understanding and continued support as we conduct maintenance year-round and a variety of larger projects over the next few years—culminating in the construction of new schools.”

After her tour over the weekend, Ms. Sarauw said, “Administrators, teachers and support staff are performing herculean tasks at this stage in the game. They are indeed a precious natural resource. Given the latest developments and reshuffling of CAHS,

Cancryn and Lockhart school there is still a bit of chaos and uncertainty. Ironically on Labor Day weekend, where we observe the social and economic achievements of workers, many of those union employees will be working through the holiday in order to prepare for Tuesday. But, I firmly believe that school should be delayed two – three days for those three schools in particular. They are truly not ready to open. If we rush the opening of school for those three schools, staff will begin the year disorganized, burnt out and stressed. The mental state of our professionals should be taken into account."

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