

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Virtual Learning Hours, Lack of Devices for Hundreds of Students and Teacher Shortage Among Concerns Raised at Hearing

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Facing criticism from parents and pressing questions from lawmakers, the V.I. Dept. of Education on Wednesday sought to defend its performance relative to the rollout of virtual learning for public school students in the territory.

The department testified during a Senate hearing Wednesday and listed a number of issues that have affected the virtual learning rollout, including a shortage of teachers, the lack of local funds to procure learning tools immediately and the issue of grading students, among other setbacks.

D.O.E. testifiers reiterated that the department had to wait until July 25 for access to CARES Act funds to purchase learning tools for students, though the funding, \$19.9 million, was available from June. During a [Senate hearing in August](#), the department said the company it has been paying roughly \$3 million for services such as payments processing, named [Munis](#), was closed from June 22 to July 12, which the department said hindered its ability to order important items in a timely fashion. At the time D.O.E. was looking to secure 3,000 Chromebook laptops.

"The technology equipment in the St. Thomas-St. John District is extremely limited, and the leadership eagerly awaits the shipment of the new Chromebooks for every student," said Stefan Jurgen, superintendent of the St. Thomas-St. John District.

According to Carlos McGregor, superintendent of the St. Croix District, "Through the redistribution of technological devices throughout the district, the remaining 223 students who indicated the need for a technological device to complete instruction will soon receive one." Mr. McGregor said seniors at the St. Croix Central High School and the St. Croix Educational Complex without devices should receive their laptops by Monday and no later than Tuesday.

Another issue facing the department is one familiar to Virgin Islanders, as year after year the department has complained about the issue but has yet to find an effective way to mitigate the problem. According to Education Commissioner Racquel Berry-Benjamin, for the 2019-2020 school year, D.O.E. has had 62 teachers territory-wide either retire or leave the department. As a result of these separations, the department said it currently needs 96 teachers.

"We are working actively to fill those critical vacancies," said Mrs. Berry-Benjamin. "We engage in interviews regularly to fill teacher vacancies as well as tap into our valued substitute teacher pool."

Until the department can fill the vacancies with in-person educators, both school districts have been utilizing Ed-Options Academy to temporarily fill vacancies. Ed-Options is a K-12 online school that provides an alternative approach to education "in a challenging but fun and rewarding academic setting," [reads a description](#) on the organization's website. The department has also been utilizing some teachers to conduct lessons at more than one school.

The transition to distant learning has not only been hard for students but their parents as well. Many parents across the territory have found themselves faced with either homeschooling their children or going to work. Senator Kurt Vialet brought the matter to the fore. "I have a serious concern with working parents and the school schedules. There are individuals who have an 8-5 job and can't report to work or can only come to work for two hours. It is hard. We are psychologically stressing single parents, especially single moms," said Mr. Vialet.

The senator stated to Education testifiers that students have been in double sessions before, which saw students receiving about 4 hours of instruction a day. He suggested that D.O.E. consider the possibility of compressing the school schedule from 8:00 a.m. to 12 noon so that working parents could be able to earn a living. Ms. Berry-Benjamin responded by stating, "anything is possible." Even so, she said because students had

lost instructional time because of the Covid-19 pandemic, the plan has been to make sure they receive as much learning hours as possible. She reiterated, however, that if this plan proves to be ineffective, D.O.E. would make necessary adjustments.

Mr. Violet reassured D.O.E. that the Senate is willing to work with the department to create a schedule that would assist working parents. Many parents are reaching because they are having severe difficulties as not every job site or every business would allow their employees to miss a bulk of the day, every single day, said Mr. Violet.