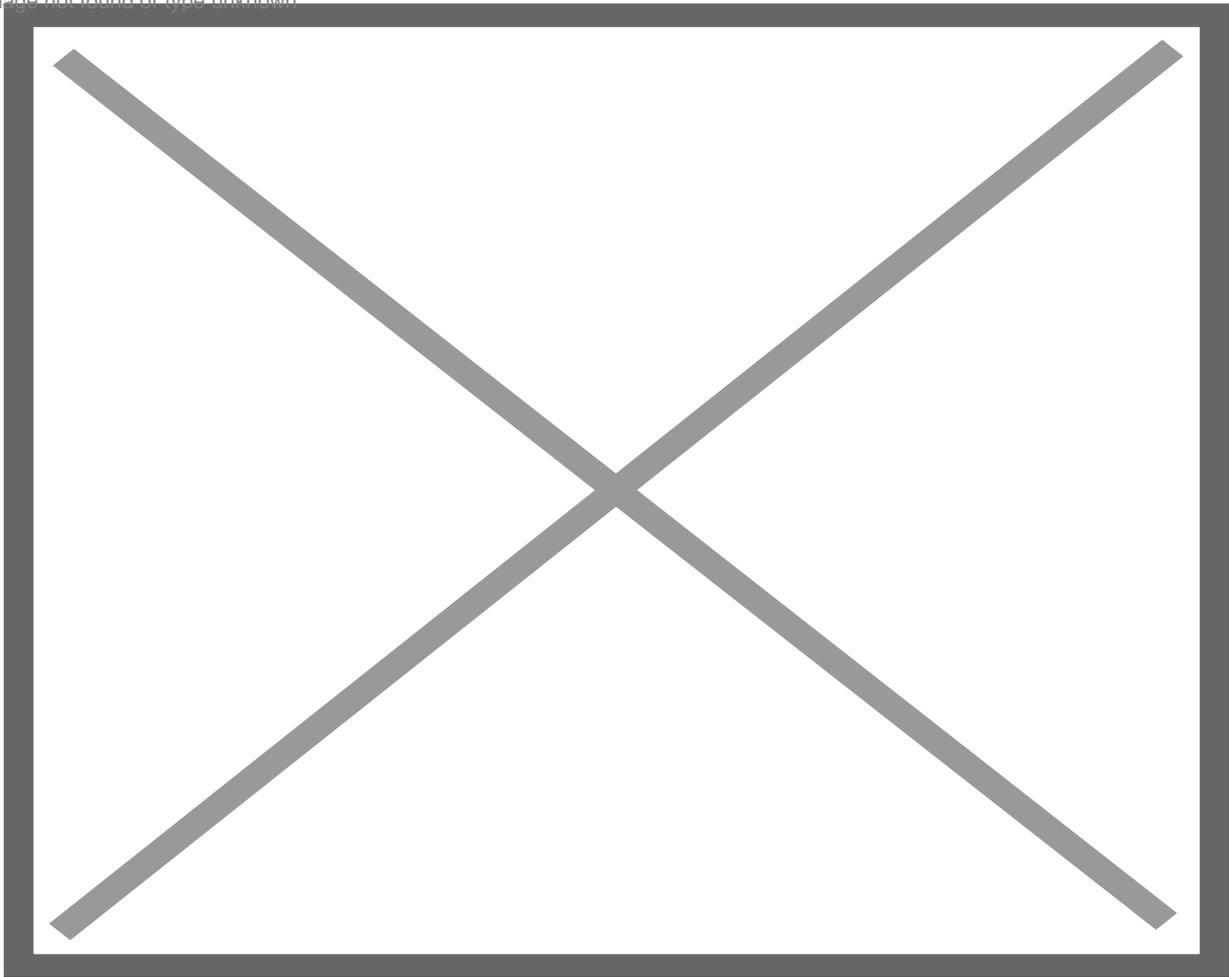


Board of Education Blocks Dept. of Education From Suspending Grading Even as Hundreds of Students Lack Equipment to Learn Virtually

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Ernice Gilbert **September 24, 2020**

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The Department of Education on Wednesday said it would move forward with grading even as department officials on Wednesday testified that hundreds of students have indicated they lack the tools — including laptops and internet — necessary to learn virtually.

D.O.E. had failed to secure enough Chromebook laptops in time to cover all students, an issue the department blames on Munis, a third-party company the department has been paying roughly \$3 million for services such as payments processing. D.O.E. received CARES Act funding for education of \$19.9 million since June. However, during an August hearing, D.O.E. officials said Munis was closed from June 22 to July 12, which the department said hindered its ability to procure enough Chromebooks in a timely fashion.

"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 Education Commissioner Racquel Berry-Benjamin, D.O.E. has not suspended grading. She said the department twice requested from the Board of Education that it be allowed to suspend grading, but the request was denied. D.O.E. communications head, Cynthia Graham, said in a release Wednesday that the request was made to allow all students to receive the necessary learning tools, and that the Board of Education did not provide a reason for rejecting the request.

According to Ms. Graham, in a memo to district leaders on Tuesday, Mrs. Racquel Berry-Benjamin wrote, "Students shall be graded on work taught to them and/or assigned to them by a teacher during all four marking periods or two semesters on the school calendar dated 8/26/2020."

During the hearing, Herman Ottley, D.O.E. director of curriculum and instruction, said the department had discussed a "scaffolded approach," which he explained as an effort that sees students who can participate in virtual instruction receiving grades from their teachers, while those without the requisite tools would be administered oral assessments. Mr. Ottley said while this plan had not been submitted to the Board of Education, the territorial committee went ahead and drafted the plan in a proactive effort to assist students lacking the necessary virtual learning tools.

Senators also inquired about the department's plan for E.S.L. (English as a Second Language) students, those with disabilities, along with alternative school students. St. Croix District Superintendent Carlos McGregor said E.L.S. students are placed in classrooms with certified E.L.S. teachers, and those students are afforded the same learning experiences that would happen in a regular school. However, for students requiring one-on-one sessions, Mr. McGregor said such instruction happens at the end of the school day. Dr. Migdalia Cruz Arthurton, St. Thomas-St. John coordinator of the Bilingual/E.S.L. Education program, said the St. Thomas- St. John District has been utilizing the same approach.

On Special Education, D.O.E. said, "Special Education teachers and related service providers will provide instruction and services to students according to their individualized education plans through collaboration and planning with general education teachers and paraprofessionals."

Sheryl Serano-Griffith, district director of Special Education, said, "Services will be provided in two ways. In some cases, the service provider will be working with the teachers to provide students' services within the virtual classroom environment. In other cases, they will be reaching out to the families specifically to provide the services directly within the home environment."

She said the reason for this is because D.O.E. serves children from age 3 to 21, "so depending on where the student sits and what their school day looks like, that will impact how the services would be delivered."

As for students in Alternative Education, the D.O.E. action plan sees students participating in an intervention academy where they receive support from a caseworker, an individual tutor and a career specialist.

"Our goal is to ensure the V.I. public education system emerges from the current pandemic better than it went in. Distance learning is our new norm, and we have risen to the occasion," said Mrs. Berry-Benjamin.

Consortium writer Maxiene K. Cabo contributed to this story from St. Thomas.

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