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Education Announces Delay of Hybrid Learning Plan From Jan. to Feb./March, Details Strategy

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The V.I. Department of Education controlled most of the floor during Thursday's weekly Government House press briefing, revealing that the launch of its hybrid learning model had been pushed back due to delays in equipment indelible to the learning process in the Covid era, as well as the spike in coronavirus cases following the holiday season.

When the department [first announced its plans early December](#), it said classes would begin Jan. 25. Now, the department is only giving a February/March window. D.O.E. Commissioner Racquel Berry-Benjamin said a key factor on why the roll-out will most likely begin in February/March is the “unprecedented delays in the shipment of critical items that would help us open schools safely.” She mentioned that D.O.E. was missing automatic soap and hand sanitizer dispensers that are needed before schools can open to in-person learning again. Without this equipment the

schools will not be approved by the Department of Health to re-open, she said.

The department said it has invested in optional hand-washing stations and plexiglass fixtures not required by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention.

Another factor contributing the delay that Ms. Berry-Benjamin mentioned is the current spike in the number of active Covid-19 cases following the holiday season. D.O.H. [reported 38 new cases on Wednesday](#), with the territory's current total active cases standing at 156 as of Thursday.

The reopening plan will vary in some aspects by district but there are many elements that are consistent throughout the territory. Both districts will be implementing staggered rollouts of their respective plans. This process is to ensure that students can adjust to campus life with all the Covid-19 protocols in place.

“Phase Yellow” of the plan has students from Pre-K to 3rd Grade, students with special needs, and Career and Technical Education returning to in-person learning, while students in grades 4-12 will continue learning online. If parents do not want their students to return to in-person learning, they can ask their child’s teacher for a permission slip to opt-out of classroom learning and continue distance learning, D.O.E. said. Students have the ability to learn exclusively online from their home, through the aid of educational platforms guided by their teachers.

The biggest difference in the two plans is that St. Croix students will be returning to school five days a week while students in the St. Thomas-St. John district will be placed into two cohorts, with each cohort participating in-person two days a week and distance learning three days a week.

Each school will host orientation for parents before they reopen to explain the key logistics of reopening their specific campuses. School bus service will still be provided but it was suggested that parents drive their children, if possible.

In her closing remarks Ms. Berry-Benjamin said, “The VI D.O.E is resilient, no matter the challenge we face it with courage, competence, compassion and creativity.”

Members of the V.I. Department of Education will be on local radio next week further explaining this plan to get students back into the classroom.