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Frett-Gregory-Sponsored Bill Making Virtual Learning Permanent as a Supplement During Times of Teacher Shortage Now Law

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A bill sponsored by Senator Donna Frett-Gregory, which makes virtual learning permanent as a supplement in times of teacher shortage, was signed into law by Governor Albert Bryan.

According to Ms. Frett-Gregory's office, historically, the Virgin Islands has been challenged with severe teacher shortages, especially in critical areas like math, science, and the foreign languages. Bill No. 33-0360, now Act No. 8400, seeks to plug this gap, requiring the Board of Education to establish a distance learning policy and the Department of Education to implement the program within a certain timeframe and to ensure standards are met. Act No. 8400 ensures that student learning isn't significantly disrupted after a natural disaster, or at any other point where students cannot learn on-campus, according to the release.

The program is currently only available at the high school level, said Ms. Frett-Gregory, although availability to junior high students could be incorporated in the future as data of the program's implementation become available. The senator also stressed that the program will not affect the teacher unions, as it only takes effect where there are teacher shortage problems.

“We could not have imagined facing a global pandemic that would completely change the delivery of education across the globe,” Ms. Frett-Gregory said. “The same way we could not imagine facing two category 5 hurricanes back to back in 2017. We learned quickly that we must adjust our model so our children can receive a quality education aligned with 21st century best practices.”

According to the release, in addition to being able to learn from anywhere, Act No. 8400 will give students the opportunity to take courses of interest that were previously unavailable because of non-existent teachers in the talent pool, like data analytics, and will help build comradery territory-wide by allowing students in both districts to share virtual classrooms. This innovative way of teaching has never been seen before in the Territory, and is one of three measures championed by Frett-Gregory to push education reform, Ms. Frett-Gregory's office said. The other two measures, Act No. 8374 and Act No. 8270, strengthens career tech and early childhood education in the Territory respectively.

“The distance learning legislation was not a result of COVID-19,” said the senator. “However, this pandemic underscores the value of thinking outside the box in how we prepare our children for a competitive global community. Distance learning will provide them with opportunities they would not otherwise be able to tap into, had it not become law.”

Distance learning is commonplace on the mainland, and has been successful in many states like Florida and New York. Act No. 8400 is definitely not a “cure-all”, but will be a valuable tool to help the Department of Education move the needle forward . Ms.Frett-Gregory said she will be arranging meetings with the Board of Education and the Department of Education to ensure our students reap the benefits of Act No. 8400.