

logo not found or type unknown

Schools Will Reopen to In-Person Learning 'At the Appropriate Time,' Education Commissioner Says, Frustrating Senators

Education / **Published On February 13, 2021 04:06 AM /**

Kyle Murphy **February 13, 2021**

Image not found or type unknown



Aerial shot of the St. Croix Educational Complex. The Dept. of Education said Friday it could not give a solid date on when in-person learning would resume. By. ERNICE GILBERT FOR VI CONSORTIUM

The Senate Committee on Education and Workforce Development hosted a hearing Friday with the goal of gaining clarity on when public schools in the territory would reopen to in-person learning. However, to the dismay of members of the 34th Legislature, the Department of Education and the Board of Education said that they were still not ready to announce when the reopening of schools would happen.

“We anticipate announcing the reopening of the school buildings at the appropriate time,” said Dept. of Education Commissioner Racquel Berry-Benjamin, stating that D.O.E. lacked the necessary items that would facilitate the safe reopening of in-person learning in line with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines. “No official date for the reopening of schools will be announced until we are confident in the safe return of students, faculty and staff,” the commissioner further stated.

Senators were not satisfied with that answer.

To begin her round of questioning, Senator Janelle Sarauw, vice-chair of the committee, asked about a target date for reopening. Mrs. Berry-Benjamin responded, “There is no target date.” Pushing back against the commissioner's response, Ms. Sarauw added, “I understand your dynamics of everything else but you need a benchmark. You need a target date. When you just have an open window, we will just be dragging our feet... The public needs a target date or your staff needs a target date of when you intend to open schools.”

Freshman Senator Alma Francis-Heyliger was equally disappointed with the commissioner's response. “When I continuously hear comments such as 'we don't know,' that scares me because when we fail to plan we plan to fail. And in this territory we cannot afford to fail our children,” she said.

The Dept. of Education in January [announced](#) that in-person instruction, which is already limited to a few early grades, would be delayed into February or March, citing delays in equipment procurement indelible to the learning process in the Covid era.

The delay comes as many private schools in the U.S. Virgin Islands have been opened for some time now, utilizing a hybrid strategy of in-person and virtual. On Friday, the CDC called on elementary and secondary schools to reopen safely as soon as possible, stating that schools can operate by strictly adhering to safety guidelines to diminish the risk of Covid-19 transmission in classrooms.

Pressed by Senator Novelle Francis for a reopening timeline, Mrs. Berry Benjamin said the Board of Education (B.O.E.) is the entity that has the authority to decide if schools are ready to open or not.

Kyza Callwood, B.O.E. chairperson, said a decision will be based on reports from various government agencies such as the Department of Health and Department of Planning and National Resources. “Depending on what those reports say in terms of readiness of schools, environmental safety, (and) air quality, then the board can make a decision if, in fact, we will support the Department of Education on the reopening of schools,” she said.

Another point of concern from multiple senators was the lack of a synchronized plan between the territory's two districts.

“The districts had to submit the information to the office of the commissioner. You saw one district with charts, the next district with no charts. I think at some point someone should be reviewing the documentation,” Senator Kurt Violet said.

Senate President Donna Frett Gregory also questioned the continuity between the districts. She said testimony from the department “appears to be all over the place and inconsistent.”

Ms. Frett Gregory noticed declining attendance in the St. Thomas-St. John District from Nov. 2020 to Jan. 2021. Questioned on the decline, St. Thomas-St. John Superintendent, Stephon Jurgen, said, "Some students were issued a device as well as MiFi and they simply were not logging in on." When asked to explain what he was doing about the problem, Mr. Jurgen stated, "We are making contact with students and parents regularly."

Carlos McGregor, the St. Croix district Superintendent, said during testimony, "The overall St. Croix District attendance rate increased from 84 percent in the first marking period to 93 percent at the end of the second marking period — with the highest attendance rates in pre K, 11th and 12th grades."

Senator Marvin Blyden used all of his time to ask 15 questions from teachers about the readiness of schools and protocols. "Has there been an in-depth discussion with teachers in order for them to be on the same page with the administration when it comes to the safety and logistics of the reopening of schools?" The senator was concerned that teachers posed so many questions to him, which he indicated speaks to a possible lack of communication between the department and its employees.

There was no answer to this question.

Ms. Francis-Heyliger asked about classroom ventilation, a concern that derived from a recent school tour. Mrs. Berry-Benjamin said the improvement of air quality is part of the department's infrastructure purchases through CARES Act funding.

In her closing remarks, Mrs. Berry Benjamin took a jab at lawmakers, stating that senators chose to highlight miniscule issues while failing to recognize the strides of the department. "I would say despite the efforts of some to highlight what may appear to be minor issues, we have greater successes at the Department of Education."

Senator Kenneth Gittens fired back at the commissioner through a point of personal privilege. "I'll be remiss if I didn't publicly say that I find the closing statements of the commissioner insulting and disrespectful," he said. "I find it insulting that our questioning would be looked at as highlighting minor issues when the department has major successes. If the department has major successes it is your responsibility to inform the public by highlighting it," he jabbed.

Lasted updated at 8:51 a.m. on February 13, 2021.