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## Early-Grade Students Were All Smiles as Schools Reopened to In-Person Learning on St. Croix

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**Signage at Ricardo Richards Elementary School during the facility's first day of in-person learning since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020. By. ERNICE GILBERT FOR VI CONSORTIUM**

ST. CROIX — After a full year of being barred from in-person learning as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, early-grade students — PreK-1st grade, Special Education Self-contained — along with Career & Technical Education and second-and fourth-year certificant students, returned to their physical learning facilities on St. Croix, and for many students the return represented a reunion with friends not seen for a dozen months. For many teachers, in-person learning represents a chance to help students regain learning opportunities only possible through physical interaction that were lost as a result of the pandemic.

Pearl B. Larsen, Juanita Gardine, Eulalie R. Rivera, Arthur A. Richards, Ricardo Richards Elementary, Lew Muckle Elementary, Alfredo Andrews Elementary and the Career & Technical Education Center reopened Tuesday. Claude O. Markoe, which was scheduled to reopen along with the other facilities, was pulled from the list last-minute by the Dept. of Education "until further notice," with the department citing roof leakage affecting several areas of the campus as the culprit.

Senator Kurt Violet, a former educator and veteran lawmaker, toured many of the schools on St. Croix and expressed general satisfaction with the reopening. Mr. Violet has long been an advocate for the reopening of in-person instruction, and has lamented in the past what he said were lost opportunities during critical learning years of students because of the yearlong closure of public schools, even as private facilities have maintained in-person learning throughout the pandemic.

On Tuesday, Mr. Violet spoke with the Consortium while at the Ricardo Richards Elementary School.

"I had an opportunity to visit a number of classrooms and I must say the Kindergarten students especially, they just have smiles on their face. They were so happy to be back in school," he said. "It's going to take us a while to get everything right, but for the most part the schools were complying with the mask policy and the staff was complying with the temperature checks and the sanitizing of hands, etc. I was very pleased in terms of what I saw on the first day."

Mr. Violet said important work still needs to be done, and revealed that the Dept. of Education recently received \$54 million from the Covid-19 aid bill signed in December by former President Donald Trump, funds that are to be used to make the transition to in-person learning smoother.

"I have been petitioning the Dept. of Education to retrofit all restrooms to touchless faucets, touchless urinals," the senator said. He also revealed that during the 33rd Legislature, lawmakers provided roughly \$10 million to D.O.E. for the purpose of in-person preparation. "I want to see them begin to spend those monies," he said.

Governor Albert Bryan toured the Alfredo Andrews Elementary School. "To every person along the way, right down to the custodial workers to the maintenance workers who got these buildings ready, each part of this team is important," Mr. Bryan is said to have stated, according to D.O.E. "I want to thank the school principals and the teachers for trusting in us and taking that chance to come to school."

According to the department, Mr. Bryan added, "We are doing groundbreaking things here at the Virgin Islands Department of Education, where we have just moved from students not having a lot of technology to a point where every student now has a laptop. This is spectacular."

Beginning Tues., March 9, students in 2nd and 3rd grades will resume in-person instruction, five days a week, D.O.E. said. Students in grades 4-12 will continue learning online.