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Dept. of Education Says 'Funding Issue' is Preventing it From Buying Athletic Equipment for Schools

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V.I. Dept. of Education officials were invited to testify in a hearing of the Committee on Youth, Sports, Parks and Recreation Wednesday, and the meeting had some tense moments as senators addressed key problems they felt D.O.E. had yet to address, including helping athletes receive scholarships and the lack of athletic equipment at the territory's public schools.

While senators understood that sports were on hold during the pandemic, they said D.O.E. should have used the time to put systems in place that would help increase local athletes' chances of attending schools on a sports scholarship.

Senator Janelle Sarauw, a former Division 1 volleyball player and head coach of the Charlotte Amalie High School volleyball team, used her time to address D.O.E. Director of Division Sports

and Athletics, Kennard Callendar, with a list of actions she felt could have been taken during the pandemic. Some of the items included meeting with coaches to identify top athletes in the territory in each sport, an assessment of equipment cost, and meeting with school counselors to address the eligibility of student-athletes in the classroom, among other actions.

After Ms. Sarauw's questioning round, Committee Chair Samuel Carrion gave Mr. Callender time to explain what D.O.E. had accomplished relative to sports during the pandemic. Mr. Callender spoke of a collaboration with the Dept. of Sports, Parks and Recreation to establish "Combine in the Bubble", signing a memorandum of understanding with Athletes Foundry "to help our kids be more prepared to move to the next level," and creating the "Honoring the Legend" series tournament.

Combine in the Bubble is a [program developed to provide](#) top 11th and 12th grade student-athletes the opportunity to both hone and showcase their athletic skills, with the added benefit of receiving a professionally-produced video profile that students can use to apply for athletic scholarships.

The success of Combine in a Bubble was validated as four athletes received scholarships, according to St. Croix Interscholastic Athletic Association President Lucille Hobson.

The "Honoring a Legend Series" was created to offer students an "opportunity to engage in athletic competition abiding by the health and safety rules of Covid," stated Victor Somme III, assistant commissioner of Education. He said the initiative is made up of tournaments in softball/baseball, football, basketball, track & field, volleyball and soccer. The first sport of the series is softball/baseball in honor of Eugene "Genix" Thomas, an avid baseball coach for the past 50 years throughout the territory.

"Safety preparations are in place to execute this tournament at the end of April, 2021," said Mr. Somme. Senator Franklin Johnson appreciated that "Genix" was being honored as he was once the senator's coach.

D.O.E said it will announce future tournaments in the series at the appropriate time.

Mr. Carrion sought to learn what D.O.E.'s plans were relative to the purchasing of athletic equipment for schools. Mr. Somme said equipment in the past have been procured by the respective districts. The senator followed up by asking, "Is that happening?" to which Mr. Somme responded, "To the best of my knowledge, not at this time." When asked why by Mr. Carrion, Mr. Somme said it was an issue with funding.

"I'm hearing you but that response doesn't sit well with me," Mr. Carrion said. "So what we are saying is we are not buying our young people equipment that they need in order to play sports and participate within the schools. So we are failing our young people."

He added, "I urge you to look within the budget to see where the gaps are so this doesn't happen."

Senator Alma Francis Heyliger did not let up on the lack of equipment issue. She mentioned that the Department of Education has the largest budget of the general fund, but "nobody thinks that there is a budget available to purchase sports equipment?"

Mr. Somme said D.O.E. is not purchasing the equipment but is organizing the programs and curriculum and there's a chance for the districts to include the purchase of equipment in a request. "I will do my research and respond with a definitive answer on the purchase of schools athletic equipment in the territory," Mr. Somme said. Ms. Francis Heyliger shot back: "You have to do

research as the assistant commissioner of education to tell me a senator if you are even buying equipment for sports in schools?"

Mr. Somme reiterated that the "purchase of equipment is done at the district level."

Senator Javan James shared his thoughts on the equipment matter, stating that while senators could not get a definitive answer on the purchase of equipment, the youth are readily blasted and castigated as gun-totting criminals when crimes occur. "We're quick to blast them and say the youth of the territory are idle [and] all they want to do is pick up guns. No, we want to pick up basketballs too, but we don't have the resources," he said.

Mr. James sought to learn more about a sports-teaching manual designed for physical education in public schools that is required by VI Code, and the conversations being had by the Sports Commission relative to the manual's implementation.

The two members of the Sports Commission that were present, Ms. Hobson and Mr. Callendar, said they would rather that the question be directed to the chair of the commission — a response Mr. James deemed unacceptable.

"I'm here asking a person that is a designated representative of the Virgin Islands Sports Commission and we are acting like it's some sort of secret society when it comes to the youth of this territory," he said.

Mr. James shared his personal efforts and that of the 33rd Legislature to establish the commission. Even so, "here I am asking representatives that are supposed to be carrying down mandates to help our youth, and they don't want to share that information."