

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Bryan Says Government Will Refund \$150 Graduation Fee; Drive-Thru Ceremonies Still On

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Ernice Gilbert **May 12, 2021**



Governor Albert Bryan said late Tuesday the Dept. of Education will return to parents the \$150 fee the department collected as part of hosting senior graduation events, a move that follows outcries from the seniors and their parents, who had requested the funds be returned since D.O.E. has decided to host drive-thru graduation events when students and parents had hoped for, and said they were promised, seated, in-person ceremonies, though with Covid-19 protocols for safety.

The release from Gov't House states that the funds will be returned because "Covid-19 health protocols have prevented traditional graduation ceremonies."

"We want our students and their families to celebrate this important milestone, especially after overcoming the challenges presented by this pandemic over the last year," Mr. Bryan said. "However, our primary responsibility is the health and safety of our students, their families, and that of the faculty and staff of our schools. And we cannot guarantee their safety while allowing traditional graduation ceremonies at this time. I know this is not what the graduates or their families want. So, they should not be responsible for any costs associated with this year's ceremonies."

According to the release, Mr. Bryan said the fees for each graduating senior will be paid through funds from the CARES Act.

On Monday, the administration said in-person graduation ceremonies this year for the territory's seniors are "simply not possible," with Lieutenant Governor Tregenza Roach stating Monday that gatherings of hundreds of people at those events would flout the V.I. Dept. of Health's Covid-19 protocols.

The administration stood its ground following [Saturday's protest](#) by St. Croix high school students, who took to the streets at Government House in Christiansted to protest the Dept. of Education's drive-thru graduation plans, which sees students waiting in a vehicle with their parents, driving up near a stand, getting out of the vehicle, receiving their diploma while parents take pictures, and leaving the area.

The students on St. Croix, further disappointed that St. Thomas students — at least those of the Charlotte Amalie High School — were to have an in-person ceremony — dissented. "We feel that if [bars can be open](#), if they can have [poker run](#), if [the beaches are open](#), if the Department of Education [can have a softball tournament](#), if the soccer community can have [a soccer tournament](#), then we deserve to have an in-person graduation and we do not deserve a drive-thru," said Caliyah Helliger, senior president of the St. Croix Educational Complex Class of 2021, [while protesting Saturday](#).

The students also provided D.O.E. with a number of suggestions on how to host safe, in-person ceremonies while keeping everyone safe.

Following the protest, the Dept. of Education issued a release [doubling down on its stance](#) stating it would hold only drive-thru graduation events.

On Monday, Mr. Roach reaffirmed the administration's position. "While we have made considerable progress in combating the unabated spread of the Covid-19 virus here in the territory, we're still very much in the midst of a deadly pandemic," he said. "The Department of Education and the faculty of our high schools would have loved to host traditional in-person graduations this year, but that is simply not possible."

He added, "Any attempt to accommodate an in-person graduation with students, faculty and guests would immediately violate the guidelines currently imposed by the Dept. of Health by creating a gathering of hundreds of people — and more importantly put the health and safety of our people at risk."

While the administration and its Dept. of Education find it impossible to host in-person graduation ceremonies, many education institutions on the U.S. mainland are hosting in-person, seated events for their students — though with less pomp.

The University of Oklahoma at Norman will welcome both 2020 and 2021 graduates to the university's football stadium for six separate ceremonies this spring, after holding only virtual ceremonies in 2020, President Joseph Harroz announced Feb. 4, according to [Inside High Ed](#). The same goes for the University of North Texas, where 2020 and 2021 graduates were welcomed back to Denton, Tex., for ceremonies during the last weekend of April and early May, according to the site, giving examples of a much wider trend across the United States.

High schools across the U.S., including [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#), and also one of the states with the strictest set of Covid-19 protocols, Hawaii, [will host in-person ceremonies for their graduating students](#) — all of which are being done with Covid-19 in mind.

For the Bryan administration and its Dept. of Education, "Such a large assembly of persons, many of whom would be likely unvaccinated, creates an unacceptable level of risk and could quickly lead to a setback in our diligent progress against the virus," said Mr. Roach Monday.