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Charlotte Amalie High School Presented Detailed In-Person, Seated Graduation Plan But Dept. of Education Rejected It, Principal Says

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Charlotte Amalie High School students on Thursday, May 13, 2021 protested the Dept. of Education's decision to reject their school's seated, in-person graduation plan. By. KYLE MURPHY FOR VI CONSORTIUM

ST. THOMAS — Senior students of the Charlotte Amalie High School marched through the territory's capital on Thursday afternoon, protesting the V.I. Dept. of Education's decision to reject the school's in-person, seated graduation plans organized by the school's leadership for senior students.

The students' effective protest captured the attention of Bryan administration officials and senators alike as the students made their way to various locations voicing their concerns — from the Dept. of Education headquarters to the Earl B. Ottley Legislature and Gov't House.

The students chanted "we don't want no walk-thru" throughout the protest, rejecting a D.O.E. plan for C.A.H.S. that now calls for one parent to accompany a graduate to receive the high school diploma. A parent said she was appalled by the latest criteria, telling the Consortium the Dept. of Education would have stop her and her child's father from walking with their daughter, who is a CAHS senior. She said it's either they both accompany their daughter, or they will forego the event altogether.

During the protest, one student highlighted the plight of this year's senior class. In ninth grade, Hurricanes Irma and Maria disrupted their education, resulting in the closure of some buildings and the start of double school sessions — which displaced many students. In grades 11 and 12, Covid-19 disrupted learning, leading to virtual classes that are in place for public schools in the USVI at present.

For the students, this year's graduation was seen as a moment to celebrate their achievements for years of high school that were unlike any other graduating class before them, said the students. They said they yearned for an event that they believe should match their difficult experiences faced during those years. A seated, in-person graduation would suffice, the students have contended.

"Since this year started you all are opening up bars, opening the beach, but yet you all can't let us have a sit-down graduation," said one student during Thursday's protest action.

During an interview with the Consortium Thursday, CAHS Principal April Petrus said a detailed seated, in-person graduation plan, which included three separate ceremonies to account for Covid-19 protocols, was submitted to the Dept. of Education, however D.O.E. rejected the plan.

"We submitted a plan as we were instructed to do. My plan was submitted on April 7 and the day before the press conference last week Tuesday, I received a call saying that we could not move forward with our plans. The plans were very detailed; we were planning three separate ceremonies, we were trying to be creative to provide a ceremony for the students. So we had three separate ceremonies planned to be held on the campus outside. The numbers were down, we followed the CDC guidelines, and they were not approved," Ms. Petrus said.

Ms. Petrus praised the students for speaking up. "I am extremely proud of them. Even if they are not successful today, I am happy that they came forward and made their voices and their position on this situation clear to the public and to the powers that be," she said.

The Dept. of Education's plan for the 2021 graduating class is as follows:

St. Croix Central High School – May 18, 2021 @ 10 a.m.

- A stage will be erected in the main parking lot
- Students will drive up, exit the vehicle, walk across stage to receive diploma, then return to vehicle and exit campus

St. Croix Educational Complex High School – May 19, 2021 @ 10 a.m.

- A stage will be erected on the school's soccer field

- Students will drive up, exit the vehicle, walk across stage to receive diploma, then return to vehicle and exit campus

Ivanna Eudora Kean High School – May 20, 2021 @ 1 p.m.

- Students will drive up to the elevated steps of the gymnasium, exit the vehicle and move toward the Walk Ray to receive their diploma, then return to vehicle and exit campus

Charlotte Amalie High School – May 21, 2021 @ 1 p.m.

- Students will line up outside, enter the Ruth E. Thomas Auditorium and walk across the stage to receive their diploma
- Students will exit the auditorium and campus after receiving diploma