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V.I. Board of Education Calls on Dept. of Education to Reconsider Plans, Hold In-Person, Seated Graduation Events for High School Seniors

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Charlotte Amalie High School students protested in St. Thomas on Thursday, May 13, 2021 advocating for in-person, seated graduation ceremonies. By. VI CONSORTIUM

The V.I. Board of Education (VIBE) on Saturday "strongly" encouraged the V.I. Department of Education to reconsider its plans for public high school graduations across the territory, saying that it "recognizes the completion of high school as a milestone accomplishment for students, and the importance of celebrating this achievement of receiving a high school diploma."

The board also commended students and parents on their advocacy efforts for a graduation experience that is safe and meaningfully celebrates the students' perseverance after "four years of

academic disruption due to hurricanes, unplanned school closures, and the coronavirus pandemic."

According to the release, since March 9, the board has been requesting the plans for the 2021 graduation and promotional ceremonies from Dept. of Education Commissioner Racquel Berry-Benjamin. "The Board anticipated receipt of plans that adhered to Covid-19 safety guidelines to include virtual programs for a second year, smaller open-air/field ceremonies, or other creative options," the board said in its release. However, to date it has not received a response. "As a policy-making Board and partner in public education, the VIBE sought to be proactive and collaborative with the VIDE to develop graduation plans that honored student and community wishes and department mandates," stated the release.

"While the VIBE recognizes the department's statutory oversight for the day-to-day operations of the schools, the Board also has a fiduciary responsibility to investigate those matters that are of great concern relative to the management and operations of the public schools in the Virgin Islands," the education board said. "Graduation is among one of the final operational actions before the academic year ends. The Board opposes mandates that do not support parity in both districts or that make participation by students and their guests inequitable."

The board said that after considering the two public statements made by Ms. Berry-Benjamin, the complaints of students, families, and the community, "the VIBE strongly urges the Commissioner to adjust the restrictions imposed and accept the following guidelines while honoring the established health mandates:

1. Allow school administrators to properly plan the in-person graduation experience for the Class of 2021, with restrictions on the number of persons in attendance at one time and requirements for masking and social distancing.
2. Conduct multiple ceremonies per school.
3. Limit the length of each ceremony - not to exceed one and one-half hours.
4. Allow each graduate to have two guests in attendance and strictly enforce this requirement.
5. Allow schools to use outdoor spaces where applicable.
6. Allow schools to provide adequate seating, with 4-6 feet distancing for graduates and guests.

The Board of Education said it looks forward to a resolution of this matter "in ways that best honor health and safety guidelines and our graduates' milestone accomplishments."

The announcement comes a day after the Dept. of Education [issued a statement](#) following a [protest staged](#) by Charlotte Amalie High School students Thursday calling for in-person, seated graduation ceremonies. The St. Thomas action followed [a protest by St. Croix high school seniors](#) days earlier.

Over 2,600 people [have signed](#) a petition calling for in-person graduation events for the territory's seniors.

