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Public School Seniors Can Still Have In-Person, Seated Graduation Ceremonies. Here's How.

Opinion / **Published On May 16, 2021 12:20 PM /**

Ernice Gilbert **May 16, 2021**

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Charlotte Amalie High School students on Thursday, May 13 protested the Dept. of Education's plan to host walkthrough graduation ceremonies in St. Thomas. By. VI CONSORTIUM

On Saturday, the V.I. Board of Education issued a press release ["strongly" urging](#) the Dept. of Education to change course and consider holding in-person, seated graduation ceremonies for this year's senior public school students.

The board said the department should consider that this year's graduating class is a cohort whose high school years were filled with disruption, and that the students never really had an opportunity to experience those years like others before them. It's a realization not foreign to the students

themselves; [during a protest](#) in Charlotte Amalie Thursday, one of the leading protesters said that 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 eleven and twelve, Covid-19 disrupted learning, leading to virtual classes that are in place for public schools in the USVI at present.

The Board of Education in its release even provided a guide relative to how these in-person, seated events could happen, an indication that the board is on the side of the students. The guidelines provided by the B.O.E. include:

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.

But the board's suggestions hold no weight and has no bite because simply asking the Dept. of Education to change its mind does nothing to move the needle in the graduating students' favor. However, there's a way the students could still have their seated graduation events.

According to [V.I. Code Title 17 Chapter 3, Section 23](#), "The Virgin Islands Board of Education shall have the power, and it shall be the duty thereof, to hear complaints and appeals within 30 days of the date of the act complained of, to issue subpoenas, summon and examine witnesses regarding school matters, to compel their attendance at any meeting of the Board, and the Chairman or Secretary may administer oaths and take sworn testimony regarding such matters. No subpoena shall be returnable in less than five days and no person shall be denied the right of representation by counsel."

The law further states, "All appeals and complaints made to the Board of Education shall be in writing and subscribed and sworn to."

In simple terms, under V.I. law, students have the right to file a complaint with the Board of Education. In this case it would be the president of the graduating class, through a letter that must be notarized. The letter would be simple; it would only need to state the grievance and why the students believe it is important that a hearing be held on the matter. Once the board receives the letter (the notarized letter could be emailed to the chairperson of the board today, and a hardcopy delivered on Monday), the board — finding legitimate reason for the students' grievance — could schedule a hearing posthaste — a move that would behoove the Dept. of Education to postpone the senior graduation events that are scheduled for this week beginning Tuesday with the St. Croix Central High School, until a hearing is called.

A hearing would be held where student leaders and representatives of the Dept. of Education would make their case before the Board of Education. According to the law, "All decisions rendered by the Board of Education in appeal cases or on complaints shall be final, unless reviewed by the Governor." This means if the Board of Education decides that the 2021 seniors

should have in-person, seated graduation events with Covid-19 guidelines in place, this decision would be final and only the territory's governor could override it.

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