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CAHS and Eudora Kean Students Go Against Education and Health Officials During Historic 5-Hour Hearing on Graduation; Ruling Coming Today

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Ernice Gilbert **May 19, 2021**

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CAHS students on May 13 protested the V.I. Dept. of Education's decision to hold walk-thru graduation ceremonies in the St. Thomas-St. John District. By. VI CONSORTIUM

ST. THOMAS — The Board of Education on Tuesday heard arguments from senior student leaders from the Charlotte Amalie and Ivanna Eudora Kean high schools and the V.I. Department of Education, which saw the students defending their grievances against D.O.E. relative to graduation plans, and D.O.E. pushing back in a historic event whose outcome will be determined today.

The students have long contended and even led a protest action against D.O.E.'s walk-thru graduation plans. They have lamented their senior years' experience as essentially stolen by the impacts of Hurricanes Irma and Maria from 2018-19, and Covid-19 in 2020 and 2021. At the emergency hearing, they continued to advocate for in-person, seated events with Covid protocols in mind as the suitable way to exit high school. I.E.K.H.S. and C.A.H.S. graduation events have been scheduled for Thursday and Friday respectively by the Dept. of Education.

The grievances were brought before the board through a written, notarized letter Monday, which forced an emergency hearing Monday afternoon. That hearing led to the subpoenaing of Education officials and the St. Thomas senior student leaders to the Tuesday hearing. St. Croix grievances were not heard as student leaders in said district did not file their grievances on time to force a possible postponement of D.O.E.'s drive-thru graduation plans on that island. The St. Croix Central High School made the best of the Tuesday morning event, documented on the Consortium [here](#) and [here](#).

Christinique Elizee, C.A.H.S. senior class president represented her class and Malachi Pantiere, president of the senior class at I.E.K.H.S. represented his class. They were joined by one adult, Kwane Barthlett, who works at Behavioral Health at the Dept. of Health. Mr. Barthlett, brother to Christinique, was the adult representative for the students as Christinique's mother could not attend.

The Dept. of Education was represented by Commissioner Racquel Berry-Benjamin, St. Thomas-St. John District Superintendent Dr. Stefan Jurgen, Asst. Education Commissioner Victor Somme III, along with two representatives from the Dept. of Health, Asst. Commissioner Dr. Nicole Craigwell-Syms and D.O.H. Medical Director Dr. Tai Hunte-Cesar.

The students felt confident that they were in a good position following the hearing, "But like I told them, regardless of the outcome, I'm proud of them," said Mr. Barthlett, adding that incoming classes would also benefit from their effort knowing that they have a voice and are empowered through the law.

In summarizing the hearing, which started at 1:00 p.m. and ended after 6:00 p.m., the students said the hearing exposed a lot of miscommunication within the Dept. of Education, and between the Dept. of Education and D.O.H. At one point, the students called Ms. Berry-Benjamin as a witness, and D.O.E. immediately called for a recess and returned attempting to push mediation.

"A lot of miscommunication amongst themselves. A lot of word of mouth on their end versus actual clear, written, documentation regarding their policies and processes," the students said. "Plans were word of mouth, nothing written."

During their argument, the students outlined the psychological stresses faced by the 2021 graduating class, including depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts. Those impacts commenced following the storms of 2017, which displaced students and forced double sessions in 2017-18. In 2019, [two-thirds of the C.A.H.S. facility was condemned](#), leading to more double sessions and sharing of facilities. Thereafter, Covid-19 forced the closure of in-person learning in 2020, resulting in this year's senior class being the most disrupted.

At one point, D.O.E. testifiers spoke of the elaborate planning and coordination that went into hosting the oft-mentioned [recent baseball tournament](#), but the strategy backfired, the students said. "We simply redirected our argument to say if you can do it for the baseball team, what's a graduation," they said.

According to the students, Education testifiers oftentimes reverted to the Dept. of Health's Covid-19 guidelines as the reason for foregoing in-person, seated graduation events.

Attempts to reach the Dept. of Education for comment were unsuccessful. Dept. of Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion said Wednesday morning because the meeting ended late Tuesday, she hadn't gotten a full debrief and could not immediately comment.

Though arguments closed Tuesday evening, the Board of Education will reconvene this morning at 8:30. Students said B.O.E. had given D.O.E. until 10:00 a.m. today to provide documentation previously requested, and a ruling is expected thereafter.