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Board of Education Orders Dept. of Education and Dept. of Health to Host In-Person Graduation Ceremonies For Charlotte Amalie and Eudora Kean High Schools

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Charlotte Amalie High School students on Thursday, May 13 staged a protest against the Dept. of Education's plan to host a walk-thru graduation ceremony. The video as been viewed more than 20,000 times. By. VI CONSORTIUM

The V.I. Board of Education on Wednesday afternoon issued [an order](#) that directs the V.I. Dept. of Education and the V.I. Dept. of Health to come up with plans that fall within the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's guidelines to host in-person graduation ceremonies for the Charlotte Amalie and Ivanna Eudora Kean high schools. The parties are to meet today, the B.O.E.

ordered, ahead of the high schools' graduation events. The first walk-thru ceremony, that of the Ivanna Eudora Kean High School, had been planned for 1:00 p.m. Thursday.

The board said it would issue at a later date findings of fact and conclusions of law "which shall be binding on the parties."

The historic event is a major win for students of the Virgin Islands, who successfully challenged the Dept. of Education contending that the department reneged on its plans to allow the Charlotte Amalie High School to host an in-person graduation ceremony, opting for a walk-thru event instead. The students [took to the streets](#) on Thursday, May 13 to protest the department's decision, pointing to their disruptive senior experience that never really got off the ground. Some students of the 2021 graduating class say they have been battling psychological stresses, 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 displaced.

During a [five-hour hearing Tuesday](#) that ended after 6:00 p.m., the students defended their grievances against D.O.E. relative to graduation plans, and D.O.E. pushed back in a historic case that could set the precedent moving forward relative to the relationship between students and the V.I. Dept. of Education.

The students prevailed, according to the B.O.E. order, convincing the board that it was indeed possible to host in-person ceremonies.

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](#), and the St. Croix Educational Complex held their drive-thru event today.

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."

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 that because the meeting ended late Tuesday, she hadn't gotten a full debrief and could not immediately comment.

The board's order could be overridden by Governor Albert Bryan, who on Monday signaled to the Consortium that graduations would continue territory-wide. "The Board of Education has no say in what the health protocols of the Virgin Islands are. And I think people forget, we're under a state of emergency still, so the Board of Education ruling is a matter of course but it has no effect on what's going to happen. We've already made our decision and that's how the graduations will be carried out," Mr. Bryan said.

Also on Monday, Mr. Bryan responded to a Consortium question pointing to in-person, seated graduations ongoing in states across the U.S. "From the beginning of this pandemic I knew that we had to take care of ourselves; we had to make the decisions here. So every other place else in the United States can do what they want to do, we're going to continue to do the things that allow us to receive and make the progress that we've done over the last year and continue that."