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Success Amid Adversity: 170 Students Graduate at Complex High School's Drive-Thru Ceremony

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Students exit vehicles to receive diploma at a nearby stage. By. ERNICE GILBERT FOR VI CONSORTIUM

ST. CROIX — The St. Croix Educational Complex High School saw 170 students step out of vehicles and onto a stage erected in an open area to the north of the campus Wednesday to collect their diploma. Like the Central High School ceremony, the drive-thru event saw parents stepping out of their vehicles to snap pictures while the students made their way across the stage where they were elbowed in lieu of handshakes by Education officials and Governor Albert Bryan.

Also like the CHS event, most of the formalities such as speeches from dignitaries and the valedictorian and salutatorian were prerecorded events published online on the Dept. of

Education's Facebook page.

This year, the Bryan administration has chosen drive-thru and walk-thru ceremonies, a decision the administration maintains was a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. The SCEC drive-thru setup was seamless and took place in roughly an hour.

This year's class dubbed themselves "The Terrific, Talented, Tenacious Class of 2021". Makayla G. Todman earned the class valedictorian honor, while Caliyah A. Helliger earned the salutatorian honor. SCEC Principal Rodney Moorehead said the class demonstrated resiliency "by overcoming the roadblocks presented by the Covid-19 pandemic." He said the students mastered challenging feats amid the difficult year, and listed some of their accomplishments as completing dual enrollment courses at the University of the Virgin Islands and earning numerous awards — among them the Congressional Art Contest.

The students crossed the stage with smiles on their faces, seemingly grateful to have completed high school following a senior experience loaded with adversity. "Obstacles stacked up against us every year, but we overcame them every time," said Makayla, the valedictorian. "Through category five hurricane and debris, we went to school diligently. Through social distancing rules and loneliness, we supported and built each other up."

The governor, Education Commissioner Racquel Berry-Benjamin, Delegate to Congress Stacey Plaskett and Senate President Donna Frett-Gregory, all provided pre-recorded congratulatory remarks published on D.O.E.'s Facebook page. The event marked the second of four public high school ceremonies, with the third scheduled for Thursday at 1:00 p.m., when Ivanna Eudora Kean High School students will participate in a walk-thru affair. The Dept. of Education is moving forward with its plans despite [an order from the Board of Education](#) to come up with ways to facilitate in-person ceremonies for St. Thomas-St. John District high school graduates.

For at least four students the Consortium spoke with, the SCEC drive-thru ceremony was described as okay, with at least one student stating it exceeded his expectations. They all said, however, that they would have preferred an in-person, seated graduation.

"If they could put something like this together, then they could have done in-person," one student said, pointing to the track and field just near where the walk-thru ceremony was held as a suitable location that she said would accommodate social distancing and other Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Covid-19 safety guidelines.