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# V.I. Dept. of Education Failed to Provide Meaningful Ceremonies to Seniors Who Strived Through Historic Odds, V.I. Board of Education Rules

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**Charlotte Amalie High School student with cap. By. KYLE MURPHY FOR VI CONSORTIUM**

The V.I. Board of Education on Friday issued an order that lambasted the V.I. Dept. of Education for failing to provide meaningful graduation ceremonies for the senior class of 2021, who the board said had weathered back-to-back disasters that altered their course of learning and resulted in high school years filled with disruption. In light of the multiple failures, the board has ordered the department to form an advisory committee on student affairs whose aim will be to discuss graduation plans "for at least four months prior to graduation dates," among other orders.

The ruling, which scolds D.O.E. on many levels, follows protest events that started on [May 8 on St. Croix](#), followed by [a May 13 action](#) in St. Thomas. During those events, students called for in-person, seated graduations, pointing to the stresses they faced throughout their senior years, among them the 2017 storms which disrupted learning and displaced students with double sessions, and the Covid-19 pandemic that meant the class spent their entire senior year learning from home.

Then, the students [read an article on the Consortium](#) that detailed how the D.O.E.'s decisions that affect students can be challenged through V.I. law. The St. Thomas-St. John District senior class presidents took immediate action and filed a written, notarized complaint to the Board of Education — a move that set in motion an emergency board meeting Monday, followed by an emergency hearing Tuesday where senior class presidents of the STT-STJ District [went head-to-head](#) with the V.I. Dept. of Education and [won](#).

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 Education Commissioner Racquel 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.

The Board of Education ordered the Dept. of Education — which had already put in place its drive-thru, hybrid plans in St. Thomas — to come up with an in-person alternative. The board had also ordered that parties examine multiple options, but D.O.E. already had the other option in place which it said fell in line with the V.I. Dept. of Health's Covid-19 guidelines. This led to discussions on accommodating an in-person, seated event during the Wednesday night meeting, however proponents of the plans that were already in place said there was not enough time, as the first graduation event in the STT-STJ District was hours away.

In its order, seen [here](#), the board upbraided the Dept. of Education on several fronts and ordered guidelines be in place to prevent a similar situation in years to come. The board said the department's "verbal and informal criteria on graduation ceremony requirements created confusion and a significant lack of clarity."

The board further charged, "The Department did not make a significant effort to ensure whether graduation ceremonies could be done safely with additional protocols, including changing venue, using an outside venue, having multiple ceremonies and/or requiring limited capacity seating in

addition to temperature checks, masking, testing and sanitation protocols."

The board built on its blunt criticism of the department. "The D.O.E. did what was easy," it said. "The department did not make a significant effort to ensure the graduation ceremony for the class of 2021 was meaningful, especially in light of the multiple traumatic events that caused significant interruptions to the students' learning and their ability to have a normal high school experience."

Additionally, the board said D.O.E. "did not go out of its way to make sure meaningful ceremonies were planned for the seniors that marked their triumphs over significant odds." And the department also "failed to consider inequities faced by students without vehicles, students with physical challenges, or students from St. John in requiring one-size-fits-all ceremonies."

Those were just a few of the surfeit of failures the Board of Education listed, and it ordered the department, among other actions, to form an advisory committee on student affairs whose aim will be to discuss graduation plans "for at least four months prior to graduation dates." It also ordered the department to determine the status of CARES Act funding "for the provision of psychological services and social and emotional learning, and implement the necessary programs for the upcoming school year and beyond."

Additionally, the board ordered that immediately after graduation, the D.O.E. address "any need for wraparound services" for the Charlotte Amalie and the Ivanna Eudora Kean high school students.