

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Tension in Senate During Education Hearing: Berry-Benjamin 'Appalled' by Outcome; Senators Say Roughly \$400 Million Yet to be Expended as School Reopening Draws Closer

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Kyle Murphy **June 03, 2021**



Senator Janelle Sarauw on Wednesday during a Senate hearing said officials should expect and be prepared to respond to questions related to the departments they lead even if they were not provided with questions beforehand. By. VI LEGISLATURE

The tension between the V.I. Dept. of Education and 34th Legislature senators was apparent Wednesday, as lawmakers sought to dig deeper into the department's plan to spend roughly \$400 million in federal funding received by the local government from

2018 to present. Senators were left dissatisfied with the responses they received.

D.O.E. received approximately \$211 million in federal funding from CARES Act funds and the American Rescue Plan, signed into law by former President Donald Trump and President Joe Biden respectively. Senators were eager to learn of the department's plan to expend the funds to improve the quality of public schools as a return to in-person learning, [set for August 9](#), draws closer.

Senate President Donna Frett-Gregory pointed out that funds allocated from 2018 and 2019 had yet to be expended, with Ava Penn, Deputy Education commissioner confirming the senator's statement. Ms. Penn said D.O.E. has been working to spend those dollars as well. While no aggregate sum of all funds was provided, Ms. Frett-Gregory estimated the amount to be close to \$400 million. The Senate president also sought to learn what was the plan to spend funds provided in previous years while benefiting from pandemic relief monies.

Ms. Penn described the matter as a complicated situation. "We are concentrating right now on obligating the '18 and '19 CGA (Consolidated Grant Application) funds which are set to expire in September of this year. The CARES funds we have some time; the CARES funds expire '22, '23 and '24," said Ms. Penn. She said roughly \$11 million needed to be expended by Sept. 30 of this year.

Senator Genevieve Whitaker, chair of the Committee on Education and Workforce Development in which the Wednesday hearing was held, sought to learn who was in charge of CARES Act spending plans from a Career and Technical Education standpoint. Education Commissioner Racquel Berry-Benjamin said a singular answer could not cover the question, and that there were conversations outside the Department of Education that must take place before a plan can be finalized. She mentioned a goal to align the curriculum with Governor Albert Bryan's [Vision 2040 plan](#).

"We are getting all the information we need to build the V.I.D.E. plan," the commissioner stated. Ms. Whitaker, unimpressed with the response, admonished the department to "move beyond conversations."

Ms. Frett-Gregory said, "We are just having surface conversations today... What are we doing? That's the question. The department has millions of dollars — almost half a billion dollars. We have to do better than this."

Senator Kurt Vialet expressed the need for urgency. "We are going to be opening schools come August, these monies are given as a direct result of Covid and to get schools ready for opening. So I'm asking how many of those monies are going to be obligated before summer so that our schools can be ready to accept students."

Ms. Berry-Benjamin said in response that a lot of safety equipment were purchased through CARES Act funding. "We are ready to open schools in August," she said, later stating that D.O.E. still needed to secure touchless restroom fixtures and other items.

Mr. Vialet didn't think the retrofitting of restrooms should still be an issue as the Senate has been approving state of emergency requests to speed up the procurement process. He said restroom retrofitting should have been done since March 2020.

"The worst thing that can happen for the Department of Education is to open the schools the way that we left more than a year ago. We have an opportunity now, we have a state of emergency, we have literally everything in place to expedite the process and we need to see some serious work taking place this summer," he said. "My recommendation is the department needs to sit down and prioritize what direction we are going to move in so we can have our facilities reopen as quickly as possible."

Senator Novelle Francis sought a response on whether there was a way to gauge the effectiveness of the spending of federal funds in the future. In her response, Ms. Berry-Benjamin said there was no one factor that contributes to student achievement. "Federal funds help us acquire the goods and services and educational programs needed to help with student achievement, but I must say I am extremely happy and pleased in terms of effectiveness. I don't know if I could correlate the funds with effectiveness."

Ms. Berry Benjamin later expressed displeasure in general with the Senate relative to some of the questions she was asked during the hearing. "I think if we get an agenda to respond to items, we should respect that."

Senator Janelle Sarauw used a point of information to say, "I couldn't let that comment slide about prepping and we're asking questions that you didn't prepare for. If we are thoroughly engaged in a job, even if it's not requested of you, it's basic information... if you are engaged it should just roll off your tongue... We can't allow those comments to continue."

Ms. Whitaker said Ms. Berry Benjamin should learn from Wednesday's hearing to be prepared for the next. She said the Senate was caught off guard by the announcement of the August 9 school reopening.

In her response during closing remarks, Ms. Berry-Benjamin chided the Senate. "I cannot end without stating that I am totally appalled by this hearing today."

She claimed that some statements made by senators were false. "We have to be honest, the V.I.D.E and the 34th Legislature: the Committee on Education and Workforce Development because we have children to serve."

She added, "I don't appreciate today's hearing at all; we can do better. Senator Whitaker I will end by asking that our word is bond and there was a lot that was said today that is absolutely not true and I cannot allow for certain things to be said 56 days ago, outstanding documents. Whatever the D.O.E. owes the 34th Legislature we give and we provide and if there are outstanding documents trust you will get it, senator. This community has been misled here today and it cannot go unnoticed."

Ms. Whitaker was swift in her response. "Just to make sure we are all speaking facts. Fifty-seven days ago [on] April 6th, you received an agenda which we can certainly put up. [You] were we asked for the plans for schools' reopening, retention, support for students, information about funding. We've been asking about that for several months and let's make sure that's clear."