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Board of Education Says Inspections Are Needed Before it Approves Dept. of Education's Aug. 9 School Reopening Date

Education / **Published On July 13, 2021 05:21 AM /**

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Students at Lockhart Elementary School on St. Thomas attend in-person classes in March 2021. By. THE V.I. DEPT. OF EDUCATION

The Bryan administration announced in May its plan to [reopen public schools to full in-person learning on August 9](#), but the Board of Education told the V.I. Legislature Monday that it hasn't inspected and approved the reopening of schools in the Virgin Islands. The B.O.E. said it must inspect school facilities to determine whether students will be able to return safely on August 9. Public schools were closed to in-person learning territory-wide and across the U.S. from the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020.

Senator Milton Potter sought to learn from B.O.E. Chairman Kyza Callwood whether the August 9th reopening date is realistic. "I think the [V.I. Code] is clear in terms of the board has the sole authority to approve the opening of schools," Mr. Callwood said. "If in fact when we do our walkthroughs that this is not the case then the date will be pushed back."

He said the board wasn't "trying to hold anyone hostage" and that when the walkthroughs do occur, it is his hope that "everything is together and ready." Mr. Callwood said the timeframe for the inspection gives the Department of Education about a week before school reopens "for any changes or last-minute things."

Senator Marvin Blyden asked Mr. Callwood about the process of the inspection. Mr. Callwood detailed what the board will be looking for: "Environmentally sound things; making sure hand sanitizers and all those things are in place; plexiglass if needed — whatever resources that each school needs especially the bathroom facilities are up to date; in terms of signage throughout the school the board looks to ensure that it's adequately sound... Ensuring that it is environmental sound, safe and secure is of the utmost importance and concern to the board in terms of that approval."

Mr. Callwood said one of the concerns as highlighted in the board's Annual School Management Accountability Report is that there was "no specific detailed rollout plan for 2021 summer repairs" to school facilities.

This is expected to be resolved next week as both the D.O.E. and the B.O.E. made multiple mentions of a July 19 meeting where the Dept. of Education is expected to share this plan with the Board of Education.

Senator Novelle Francis asked whether there was a dispute between the two parties in regards to the Aug. 9 reopening date of public schools.

Raquel Berry-Benjamin, commissioner of Education, responded, "There is no dispute on my end. I'm not sure if on July 19 when we meet something will present and surface at that time." Mr. Callwood stated, "The board has to conduct its inspections to validate that Aug. 9 will be the date."

Mr. Francis sought to learn what would be needed for the board to approve Aug. 9 as the reopening date. Mr. Callwood said this would be possible only after the July 19 meeting where the Dept. of Education is expected to share its plans and efforts being worked on to facilitate the safe reopening of schools. He said other gov't agencies will also have walkthroughs of school facilities to determine readiness. Thereafter, the Board of Education's School Plants and Facilities (SPF) committee will make the recommendation for the board's decision .

Mr. Callwood said that after the July 19 meeting, the B.O.E. would schedule school facilities walkthroughs in two weeks. During the same week of the walkthroughs, the board will determine whether it will support Education's Aug. 9th timeline.

More information on the reopening of public schools can be found [here](#).