

The Virgin Islands Consortium

As English as a Second Language State Director Position Remains Vacant, Senators Question Quality of Service For E.S.L. Students

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V.I. Dept. of Education officials told lawmakers Thursday that they still needed to interview candidates for the vacant English as a Second Language (E.S.L.) state director position, leading legislators to question the level of service E.S.L. students — a growing population at schools in the territory — receive.

The matter was first highlighted by Senator Samuel Carrion, a Hispanic whose Senate seat was secured in part through wide support from the Hispanic community.

Education Commissioner Racquel Berry-Benjamin told Mr. Carrion that the position would be filled "as soon as we can have enough applicants to interview."

Senator Janelle Sarauw followed up on the same line of questioning after she noticed the position was not included in the Dept. of Education's budget. She then asked D.O.E. Director of Human Resources, Wendy Bailey, why. "It is not funded," Ms. Bailey stated.

Ms. Sarauw then mentioned the census, which shows continued growth of the Hispanic population in the USVI, in an effort to highlight the importance of the E.S.L. program. Ms. Berry-Benjamin said the position was defunded, causing Ms. Sarauw to question why the department failed to take advantage of \$3 million available for critical hires. Ms. Berry-Benjamin's response was, "The position is going to be filled.. It is a priority for us."

Mr. Carrion asked Ms. Berry-Benjamin whether she was aware that the position is federally mandated. The commissioner said yes. "That position is a critical position and should be funded. Hence why we are hiring for that position," the commissioner said, adding that Victor Somme, assistant D.O.E. commissioner, is responsible for ensuring that the department is in compliance with the federal mandate.

Mr. Carrion sought answers relative to efforts being made to qualify more E.S.L. teachers and whether there was federal and local funding earmarked for such programs.

Ms. Desha Powell, deputy superintendent in the St. Thomas-St. John district, said the district had a specific English Language Learners (E.L.L.) certificate program that they expect to bring online this school year. The department also hopes to pilot a master's program "to attract other individuals to that area."

Ms. Powell also revealed that an E.L.L. coordinator is in place in the STT-STJ district and that D.O.E. was spending "a little more" than \$200,000 for those programs and resources."

Ms. Berry Benjamin later clarified that both districts have E.L.L. coordinators.

Mr. Carrion sought to learn whether teachers who will participate in the E.L.L. master's program will actually be teaching E.S.L. "You can be qualified and be part of the master's program but not actually be in the E.S.L. program teaching the students that need those skills," he said. The E.S.L. matter is a personal one for Mr. Carrion, who revealed that he participated in it as a student.

"Please make sure that teachers that [go] through the master's program and acquire those training certifications with the federal money are actually using the skills that they acquire for those E.S.L. students within that program, because that's not what's happening," Mr. Carrion said.

After hearing the plea, Mr. Somme, the assist. Education commissioner, explained that funding for the E.S.L. state director has been included in President Joe Biden's American Rescue Plan. He said D.O.E.'s director of curriculum and instruction, along with the director of assessment are monitoring the progress of E.S.L. students.

"This is a priority for the Office of the Assistant Commissioner and the department overall and we are anxious to bring someone on board," Mr. Somme said.

According to the Fiscal Year Post Budget Analysis, Governor Bryan has recommended a General Fund appropriation of \$184,438,881 for Fiscal Year 2022 for the V.I. Dept. of Education. Additionally the analysis said, "The Department of Education is in line to also receive \$3,145,654 from Other Funds, \$29,740,728 in Federal Funds for a total funding level of \$217,825,263 for Fiscal Year 2022."

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