

# D.O.E. Officials Reaffirm Aug. 9 Public School Reopening Date; Educators to Focus on Social and Emotional Wellness of Students in First Ten Days

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V.I. Department of Education officials on Monday confidently answered questions from V.I. Board of Education elected members while outlining their plans to reopen public schools to full in-person learning Aug 9.

Board of Education Chairman Kyza Callwood started the meeting with a pointed question to Dionne Wells-Hedrington, D.O.E. chief operations officer: whether schools will indeed be ready for August 9. "Yes, we will be ready," Mrs. Well-Hedrington said.

She explained that in preparation for school reopening, D.O.E. "focused on the Covid-related items at first," followed by any safety and security concerns."

"We have done some beautification around our campuses," she added.

Mr. Callwood asked whether work was performed on signage, installation of Covid sanitization fixtures in restrooms, among other priorities territory-wide. Mrs. Wells-Hedrington said those items are on island "but some things are still being installed."

Education Commissioner Raquel Berry-Benjamin said, "The department has already mastered its response." She [spoke of a situation](#) in March where the department had to return to virtual learning as it awaited a test result of a suspected Covid-19 case." The education commissioner was responding to a board member's concern relative to contingency plans. She said full reopening plans would be "published by the end of this week."

Xiomara Ottley-Herman, deputy superintendent for St. Croix, delineated Education's strategy to help students transition back to in-person learning. "Our instructional focus for this school year is threefold: we have social emotional and wellness, data driven instructional planning and standards-based instruction," she said.

Ms. Ottley-Herman acknowledged that students haven't been on campus in over a year. "They also experienced social and emotional loss or trials within that time, and so in the first ten days of school we are focused on building relationships with our students. We are focusing on establishing routines and procedures to ensure that we have a safe, smooth continuity of learning in a well-rounded environment."

In the first week she expects teachers to administer the "I Ready" diagnostic test in English, Language Arts and Mathematics; administer student interest surveys and implement classroom activities to pinpoint what students can and can't do.

"During the second week, teachers will reinforce the routines and procedures and focus on foundational skills to be successful in the 2021-2022 school year," Ms. Ottley-Herman said. "They will also use this time to review the diagnostic data to create and map out instructional pathways, goals for grade levels and determine learning gains and/or learning losses."

Emmanuella Perez-Cassius, Board of Education member, asked questions relative to the ongoing contract negotiations to secure school bus transportation in the St. Croix District, and whether electricity had been connected to the modulars at the St. Croix Central High School.

Carlos McGregor, St. Croix Superintendent, said, "All students in the St. Croix district that need bus transportation will have bus transportation." He said a transformer needs to be installed for electricity to be restored to the modulars and the goal is to have it done before Aug 9.

Ms. Perez-Cassius revisited the St. Croix school bus situation. Carla Bastian, St. Croix deputy superintendent said she was forbidden to talk about the transportation issue because of ongoing negotiations. D.O.E. officials, however, were confident that a contract will be ready for August 9.

A contract for school bus transportation has been secured in the St. Thomas-St. John District, Education officials revealed.

Mr. Callwood sought to learn whether there was "commonality" between the St. Thomas-St. John and St. Croix districts relative to reopening plans. "We spent many, many days planning together so we do have the same approaches," said Smyra Dee-Brown, St. Thomas deputy superintendent.

Ms. Perez-Cassius said July 30 has been set as the date B.O.E. officials will perform school walkthroughs in the St. Thomas-St. John District and determine whether to approve the August 9 reopening. She revealed August 2 to be the date for St. Croix, but the date was challenged by Ms. Ottley-Herman, who said St. Croix district leaders, principles, administrators and coordinators would not be able to participate.

After a back and forth, Mr. Callwood said those discussions would be done in private, leaving a concrete date for St. Croix school inspections by B.O.E. unresolved.

More information on school reopening can be found [here](#).