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Dept. of Education Impresses Board of Education With In-Person Learning Readiness Ahead of Tuesday's Reopening for Some Students

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Plexiglass crown and medical protective mask on table in interior of school. By. 123RF

V.I. Department of Education officials told the V.I. Board of Education during an emergency meeting Wednesday called by the V.I. B.O.E., that school campuses territory-wide will be ready for the return of Pre K-3rd grade students, Special Education self-contained classes, and Career & Technical Education students enrolled in a specific career pathway on September 7.

The emergency meeting follows a press release issued by the board chastising the Dept. of Education for what the board said was [an attempt](#) by the department to evade requirements necessary for the safety of students and staff in a pandemic environment.

Even so, at the end of the meeting, the board left impressed with preparatory actions detailed by D.O.E. superintendents.

Board Chairman Kyza Callwood sought to learn how many students would be returning to each campus on Tuesday. Education Commissioner Raquel Berry Benjamin said an accurate figure would be tabulated from the daily attendance when students return. However, she gave totals related to eligible students returning by grade level.

There were 86 Pre-K students, 610 Kindergartners, 727 1st-grade students, 734 2nd-grade students, and 761 3rd-grade students eligible to return to in-person learning, according to Ms. Berry-Benjamin.

She said last year parents indicated they were comfortable sending their children back to in-person learning in the pandemic environment, however many of those parents changed their minds, which is one of the reasons an official figure could not be provided.

St. Croix

In terms of preparation specific to limiting the spread of Covid-19, Superintendent for the St. Croix District, Carlos McGregor, said, "All of our schools were deep-cleaned and sanitized with contracts in place for this to take place quarterly... all schools received electrostatic sprayers with the accompanying disinfecting liquid solution; all schools received the necessary PPEs, dispenser, soap, sanitizer, paper towel, temperature scanning machines and signage. All schools have installed additional hand-washing stations, all schools have filling stations for water drinking purposes and this Friday all schools will receive two pallets of bottled water... Every teacher's desk has plexiglass barrier and all PreK to 3rd grade students have a plexiglass trifold at their desk."

Mr. McGregor further stated that there were adequate teachers, though he spoke of two vacant school nurse positions due to retirement. To that end, current nurses will be rotating "to make sure all schools have a nurse until the vacancies are filled," Mr. McGregor said. He said nurses in the St. Croix district "have been trained to administer Covid-19 related testing when necessary."

"All schools in the district have developed a Covid-19 action plan specific to their school and their campuses," Mr. McGregor said.

He concluded by conveying to the B.O.E., parents and students in the St. Croix district, "We are ready to re-engage, reignite and recover learning."

While parents have the option of allowing their children to continue learning virtually, Mr. McGregor strongly encouraged that eligible students return to the in-person environment. "Research shows the most effective teaching and learning happens when students and teachers are physically in the classroom," he said.

St. Thomas

Stefan Jurgen, superintendent of the St. Thomas district, said the top priority when making the decision to physically return to campuses was the health and safety of students and staff.

He said D.O.E. worked in collaboration with the local health department, federal health agencies, key community partners and the Office of the Governor to plan a safe reopening. He added, "Schools will practice logistics of social distancing, temperature checks, Covid-19 antigen and

PCR testing for students, meal distribution and other aspects of campus life to ensure compliance and efficiency.”

Mr. Jurgen said safety signage has been posted throughout campuses to inform students and staff of safety protocols. He also mentioned that hand-washing and bottle-filling stations have been installed on all of campuses. Additionally, PPEs are available for all schools and plexiglass shields have been purchased for students' desks and staff.

“A significant amount of planning and preparation has occurred over the summer to prepare for students to return to all schools,” he said.

Like Mr. McGregory, Mr. Jurgen also encouraged parents to send eligible students to the in-person learning environment.

Student Covid Testing

Victor Somme, assistant D.O.E. commissioner, was questioned by the board chair relative Covid testing for students. Mr. Somme said students who presented symptoms of the virus would be tested.

He explained that any testing of children needs parental consent, and that D.O.E.'s legal counsel has been working on a universal consent form which could be revocable if a parent wishes to revoke consent at a later time.

With guidance from the V.I. Department of Health and approval from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “At the end of every month we will be doing a PCR test on 10 percent of the student population at each school,” he said.

Mr. Somme said this was important so as to help the Dept. of Health gauge for trends in schools and to continue contact tracing.

School nurses will perform the tests on students who exhibit symptoms as well as the monthly 10 percent testing of student population. Mr. Somme reiterated, “If your child is sick, your child should not be in school.”

Board of Education members were impressed with both presentations by each superintendent.

District-Wide Guidelines

Return to In-Person Learning

- Schools that open for in-person learning on Sept. 7 will revert to virtual learning, if guided by the VIDOH to do so, should an increase in COVID-19 cases impact in-person operations
- Students or staff exhibiting any signs of illness should remain home and seek medical attention

- The Department of Education has equipped its schools with the necessary technology to seamlessly move from in-person operations to virtual operations when necessary
- All students needing a laptop or MiFi internet device have been issued these items - additional MiFi devices will be made available in early September
- Students are required to be dressed in full uniform while on campus
- Visitors, including parents, are not allowed on school premises without an appointment

Campus Safety Protocols

Masks

- Students and staff are required to wear masks that cover the nose and mouth while on campus; masks are considered a part of the school uniform
- Regular breaks are incorporated into the school day or on an as-need basis for students to remove their masks outside

Hand-washing/Sanitization

- Frequent hand-washing and/or use of hand sanitizer is a normal part of the school day
- Additional hand-washing stations have been placed throughout school campuses; bathrooms and classrooms have been retrofitted with automatic paper towel, soap and hand sanitizer dispensers

Social Distancing

- Under the guidance of the V.I. Department of Health, a two-feet distance will be maintained between desks and students/staff are required to maintain three-feet social distancing when traversing the campus

Plexiglas Barriers

- Plexiglas barriers are installed at teacher desks, at student desks in grades PreK-3rd, and at front offices. These barriers are not required by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) or the VIDO; the Department of Education installed the items as an added measure of safety for students and staff

Temperature Checks

- Temperature checks will be taken each morning before students and staff are granted entry into the school building
- Isolation rooms have been made available on each school campus to accommodate students and staff exhibiting signs of illness

Covid-19 On-Campus Testing

- With support from the VIDO and the consent of parents, schools will conduct regular COVID-19 testing of students
- The Department of Education has also partnered with Affinity Empowering, a U.S. Department of Health and Human Services contractor, to bring PCR testing to K-12 students

Vaccination

- The Department of Education strongly encourages all employees and students age 12 and older to get vaccinated
- The Department of Education, in conjunction with the Department of Health and the teacher's unions will host a series of on-campus vaccination drives for school-based personnel during the month of September
- To schedule an appointment for a FREE COVID-19 vaccine, visit www.covid19usvi.com/vaccines.

School Lunch

- Students in grades PreK-3 will receive packaged breakfast and lunch meals in their classrooms

- Other students may retrieve breakfast and lunch, in a grab-and-go format, from a designated area on the school campus
- Cafeterias will remain closed
- Parents/guardians of students learning virtually may visit the meal distribution site closest to their home to pick up meals (see attached distribution sites)

School Bus Transportation

- School bus transportation will resume regular operations; a comprehensive bus schedule will be released to the public
- Students and bus operators are required to wear a mask that covers the nose and mouth while on the school bus
- Under guidance from the VIDO, no more than two students are allowed per seat
- The VIDO will conduct regular site visits to bus stops to ensure safety protocols are being followed

For the last three months of the 2020-2021 school year—March through May—the V.I. Department of Education resumed in-person learning for students in grades PreK-3rd, Special Education self-contained classes, and Career & Technical Education students enrolled in a specific career pathway.