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U.S. Dept. of Education Approves USVI's Plan for Use of \$138 Million American Rescue Plan Funds to Support Schools

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The U.S. Department of Education announced Tuesday the approval of the V.I. Department of Education's "American Rescue Plan Outlying Areas State Educational Agency" (ARP-OA SEA) implementation plan. D.O.E.'s plan details how American Rescue Plan funds will be used to sustain the safe operation of schools and equitably expand opportunity for students who need it most, particularly those most impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, according to the release.

The U.S. D.O.E. released the Return To School Roadmap, which provides key resources and supports for students, parents, educators, and school communities to build excitement around returning to classrooms this school year and outlines how federal funding can support the safe and

sustained return to in-person learning. American Rescue Plan funds can be used to support the roadmap's efforts.

"I am excited to announce approval of the Virgin Islands Department of Education plan," said U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona. "It is heartening to see, reflected in these plans, the ways in which education systems are thinking deeply about how to use American Rescue Plan funds to continue to provide critical support to schools and communities. The approval of these plans enables education systems to receive vital, additional American Rescue Plan funds to help keep schools open full-time, in-person learning; meet students' academic, social, emotional, and mental health needs; and address disparities in access to educational opportunity that were exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic. The plans that have been submitted to the Department lay the groundwork for the ways in which an unprecedented infusion of federal resources will be used to address the urgent needs of America's children and build back better."

"The Virgin Islands Department of Education is deeply appreciative to our partners in Congress and the U.S. Department of Education for generously making available funding that has allowed us to safely continue teaching and learning during the pandemic," said Education Commissioner Racquel Berry-Benjamin. "The funds have been appropriately used to outfit our schools and classrooms with the necessary tools to ensure the safety of students and staff. Furthermore, the funds have been central to us closing the digital divide by establishing and expanding our technological infrastructure, allowing for the purchase of laptops and internet access for all Virgin Islands students. While these times have undoubtedly been challenging, they have also brought about great opportunity. We remain grateful for the support U.S. Department of Education continues to provide."

"The American Rescue Plan provides \$138 million to the Virgin Islands to help K-12 schools take the steps recommended by the CDC to ensure students and educators can return to the classroom safely," said Delegate to Congress Stacey E. Plaskett. "The success of our educational system is important to the success of our students and to the strength of our community. The American Rescue Plan makes a historic investment that will secure the future of educational institutions and provides struggling students with urgent relief that will allow them to stay on track and complete their education. I am proud that we were able to deliver this support for our educational system, and I applaud the Biden-Harris Administration for its relentless focus on defeating the pandemic and building back a better economy."

According to the release, the implementation plan approved by the U.S. D.O.E. today outlines how federal pandemic funds are supporting safe, in-person instruction and the social, emotional, mental health, and academic needs of students—with a focus on the students most impacted by the pandemic. For example: Returning to In-Person Learning in 2021: The St. Thomas/St. John School District of the U.S. Virgin Islands seeks to implement a multi-tiered comprehensive program that positively impacts the social and emotional development, and academic learning, as well as the physical and mental well-being, of students in all subgroups, stated the release. Staff will be trained to address the social-emotional needs of students and staff in the school setting.

Addressing the Academic Impact of Lost Instructional Time: The St. Croix School District of the U.S. Virgin Islands seeks to focus on building student morale, rekindling the passions for returning to school in-person by addressing school spirit, increasing student participation in supplemental courses, and providing opportunities for student athletes with ARP funding, the release further stated. The goal of this program is to reconnect students and educators socially, emotionally, and academically to the school environment; reduce learning loss through athletics,

military sciences, and supplemental programs; and increase learning gains through student participation in afterschool programs, school events, and supplemental programs.

Investing in Summer Learning and Expanded Afterschool Programs: the V.I. D.O.E. will offer after-school and Saturday academic programs that provide a variety of academic and enrichment opportunities for students, including the Pathways to Success After-School Program, an extended school day program where students will receive small group or individual tutoring, and Homework Hotline, which will provide students additional academic support and opportunities to engage in discussion and questioning to encourage a deeper and more robust understanding of various subject matters.?

The ARP-OA Fund, authorized under Section 2005 of the ARP Act of 2021, provides \$850 million for the Secretary of Education to allocate to the Outlying Areas (American Samoa, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Guam, and the U.S. Virgin Islands) based on their respective needs. The Secretary allocated these funds to support safely reopening and sustaining safe operations of schools while meeting the academic, social, emotional, and mental health needs of students resulting from the pandemic.

Today's approval of the implementation plan is part of the U.S. D.O.E.'s broader effort to support teachers and other educators as they work to reengage students impacted by the pandemic, address inequities exacerbated by COVID-19, and build our education system back better than before, stated the release. In addition to providing \$130 billion for K-12 education in the American Rescue Plan to support the safe reopening of K-12 schools and meet the needs of all students, the Biden-Harris administration also has:

Held the Return To School Road Trip, a bus tour that visited schools across five states in five days to celebrate the safe return to school.

- Announced new mental health resources to provide information and resources to enhance the promotion of mental health and the social and emotional well-being among children and students.
- Launched the Return To School Roadmap to provide key resources and supports for students, parents, educators, and school communities and outline how federal funding can support the safe and sustained return to in-person learning.
- Released three volumes of the COVID-19 Handbook.
- Hosted a National Safe School Reopening Summit.
- Prioritized the vaccination of educators, school staff, and childcare workers.
- Provided \$10 billion in funding for COVID-19 testing for preK-12 educators, staff, and students.
- Launched a series of equity summits focused on addressing inequities that existed before but were made worse by the pandemic.
- Released a report on the disparate impacts of COVID-19 on underserved communities.
- Developed a Safer Schools and Campuses Best Practices Clearinghouse elevating hundreds of best practices to support schools' efforts to reopen safely and address the impacts of COVID-19 on students, educators, and communities.

According to the release, in addition to the actions the Biden Administration has taken to reopen schools, the president has proposed critical investments through his Build Back Better Agenda. "The Build Back Better legislation will offer universal and free preschool for all 3- and 4-year-olds and, make education beyond high school more affordable—including offering more trainings

and apprenticeships, by increasing the maximum Pell Grant, expanding access to DREAMers. It will also make historic investments in Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Tribal Colleges and Universities, and minority-serving institutions," according to the release.

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