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Education Commissioner and V.I. Board of Education Chairman Subpoenaed to Appear Before Senate Committee After No-Show

Politics / **Published On November 24, 2021 04:43 PM /**

Linda Straker **November 24, 2021**

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Education Commissioner Racquel Berry-Benjamin. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE

Dept. of Education Commissioner Racquel Berry-Benjamin and five other Board of Education officials were on Tuesday subpoenaed to appear before the Committee on Education and Workforce Development on December 14, after they failed to testify before the committee.

The committee, chaired by Senator Genevieve Whitaker was expecting testimony from the V.I. Department of Education and the V.I. Board of Education on their plans for the January 2022 school reopening.

The invited testifiers according to the committee's order paper were Ms. Berry-Benjamin and

Kyza Callwood, chairman of the V.I. Board of Education. However, a letter from the Board of Education addressed to Ms. Whitaker suggested another date because the testifiers said they were unable to make the November 23 date.

“On behalf of Chairman Kyza A. Callwood, the V.I. Board of Education will not be available to testify at the Committee on Education and Workforce Development’s upcoming hearing. In addition to our previously mentioned competing demands that require our immediate attention prior to the upcoming holidays, members of the board will be participating in school tours,” the letter said.

It further explained that last month the VIBE (through its School Plants and Facilities committee) proposed a “soft opening” plan to the Department of Education to return all public-school students and staff to in-person learning.

“The school tours are being conducted as part of the VIBE’s continued efforts to support the Department. In addition to ongoing discussions with the Department relative to health and safety, maintenance, and risk management protocols, we are also discussing its plans to address scheduling, transportation, online learning and technology criteria, and protocols, staffing, and board policies that should be included in the Department’s written school re-opening plan,” the board elaborated.

“As such, please consider conducting the hearing on November 29 or 30, 2021, or the first week of December 2021. This will allow the VIBE time to review the information received from the school tours and discuss its findings,” the letter suggested.

Ms. Berry-Benjamin also submitted an excuse to the committee. “I am in receipt of your invitation to provide testimony on Tuesday, November 23, 2021, before the Committee on Education and Workforce Development in Block II on the plans for the 2022 school reopening,” she wrote.

“As previously indicated in my November 3, 2021 follow-up letter regarding your former invitation to testify on Tuesday, November 9, 2021, before the Committee on Education and Workforce Development, the V.I. Department of Education has a full schedule during the months of November and December 2021,” she said.

“Regrettably, the Department is unable to participate in the hearing Tuesday, November 23, 2021, as we will be engaged in previously scheduled meetings as well as conducting school assessment walkthroughs with the V.I. Board of Education at schools that are preparing to welcome students on January 10, 2022.

"If January does not work for you, in the spirit of collaboration, I humbly ask that you consider one of the December dates below that were previously proposed,” said the letter which recommended the dates of December 23, 28, or 29.

The motion to subpoena the education officials was moved by Ms. Whitaker. They are to appear virtually before the Committee on December 14th 2021. The others who will be joining Ms. Berry-Benjamin are Superintendent for the St Croix District Mr. Carlos McGregor; Superintendent for the St. Thomas District Dr. Stefan Jurgen; Chief Operating Officer Dionne Wells- Hedgington and Maintenance Supervisors Joseph Sibley and Davidson Charlamagne.