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Senators Deem Education Hearing Another Frustrating Experience With Lack of Information

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Senator Donna Frett-Gregory expressed frustration with Dept. of Education Officials During a Senate hearing on Tues. Dec. 14, 2021. By. THE V.I. LEGISLATURE

Senate President Donna Frett-Gregory and other lawmakers were not satisfied with some of the responses from Department of Education officials when they came before the Committee on Education and Workforce Development Tuesday to discuss and examine plans for the January 2022 reopening of schools for in-person learning.

Members of the committee were either being provided with unsatisfactory and or inadequate answers to pertinent, general and specific questions about particular schools whose doors were

closed because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Some of the same schools suffered structural damages since 2017 as a result of the destruction following the passage of hurricanes Irma and Maria, and are still dilapidated or in substandard conditions.

Questions ranged from the dropout rate of students to the quality of meals served for lunch, including the temperature and size of classrooms. Senators clearly expressed their frustration with several of the unclear responses from the Education Department officials.

“It is always very difficult, I don’t know why it has to be that difficult. I actually worked for the Department of Education at some point in time in my career, but it always seems very difficult for us to get information from this particular team,” Ms. Frett-Gregory said when it was her turn to seek clarity about matters raised by other members of the committee.

“It becomes very frustrating because it seems as if we are just spinning our wheels. Every time it comes down to the Legislature, we do our rounds and we really get nothing from it and I am one that believes if we’re going to have these types of meetings we have to have outcomes,” she told Education Commissioner Racquel-Berry Benjamin and the other Dept. of Education officials who were [subpoenaed on Nov. 23](#) after they failed to testify before the committee.

Reminding them that she was once in their position years ago when she was employed at D.O.E. as the department's commissioner, Ms. Frett-Gregory stated, “I have come before this body; I can't tell you the number of times and I was not happy about it but I came because it was my responsibility.”

“The senators had questions and they had recommendations and as they made their recommendations we would go back and discuss what happened on the Senate floor. There were things we needed to show up ourselves with,” she said while recalling the numerous occasions in which questions were not answered in a detailed manner or it had to be deferred or referred to another official.

“I get the feeling that the information, the question that we asked, it just feels like a very antagonizing relationship, and I think that you all really have to remember that this is not about any of us because all of us have already graduated. This is about the future of the children of the Virgin Islands,” she said.

Ms. Frett-Gregory said the conduct of the Education officials was not a positive reflection of what needs to happen during a Senate hearing, and that if students were present and they were asked to write a report of what they observe in that particular hearing, the write-ups would not be good.

“If we were to have our students watch this as part of an exercise, I would not want to know what the responses would be if we ask them to do a report on what they are seeing today. It is not good, we got to do better,” she told the Education officials which included superintendents and maintenance supervisors.

“I am really trying my best to keep my cool because it is very frustrating,” added Frett-Gregory, who reminded the officials that there was a point in time when the Department of Education and the management of schools was in touch with everything.

“But right now it appears as if the department has this top-down approach to things,” she said while reminding the Education officials that the hearing was to focus on the readiness of schools and what they need for the [scheduled January 2022 reopening](#).

