

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Dept. of Education Details Plans Ahead of January In-Person Reopening of Public Schools as Omicron Spreads

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Linda Straker **December 27, 2021**



Students at the St. Croix Educational Complex High School prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. By. V.I. CONSORTIUM

Education Commissioner Racquel Berry-Benjamin says that the reopening of schools for in-person learning in January 2022 has come with some challenges, but the overall goal is for students to adapt to the new acceptable norms in society created by recommendations from public health specialists because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

"The goal is for us to continue learning in-person and the importance of that is we really have to get our children practicing at a higher intensity the safety protocols because it's our new day, this is our new world," she said during the latest episode of the Bryan administration's "Press Box".

She explained that principals of schools will be authorized to make changes to ongoing guidelines because of the changing dynamics that may be linked directly or indirectly to Covid-19 spikes or outbreaks in the territory.

Referring to the Covid-19 situation as ongoing and very active, Ms. Berry-Benjamin said principals will be empowered to make decisions in the best interest of students.

"Principals will have to make decisions on the spot given the nature of the circumstance at the time. So while we may start the school year one way, maybe with cafeteria sitting, we might have to revert to eating in our classrooms throughout the entire school," she said.

"So, it's a day-to-day observation that principals will do as they lead the schools," said Ms. Berry-Benjamin who was accompanied to the interview by Assistant Commissioner Victor Somme. Mr. Somme also shared some of the new health safety initiatives undertaken by the Department of Education.

"We have done a plethora of things for staff particularly specialized staff like managers, food service workers, our custodians — we are doing even more training when faculty and staff return on January 7, 2022," he said.

Elaborating, he said, "We have purchased thermal scanners and thermometers, so if you walk into a school the first thing that you will notice is there will be somebody at the door to scan your temperature to make sure that you are safe to be in that building."

"We have been working steadfastly with the Department of Health and our school nurses and other stakeholders and other partners to do essentially two types of testing: to do symptomatic testing — that is those students who present with signs and symptoms can be tested with a rapid antigen test and in 15 minutes get results," Mr. Somme added.

As for PCR testing, the Education Department will be working with Infinity Empowering, which is a U.S. health and human servicing contractor to do PCR or surveillance testing using PCR. "That is important because we can track trends that help us with contact tracing. It provides us with information so that we can make informed decisions about how Covid-19 affects schools, how Covid-19 will affect staff and students," he told Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion who was the host of the program.

Ms. Encarnacion advised parents to not treat flu or cold-like symptoms among children as simply having a cold because things are different now and what they may think is the common cold could very well be a Covid-19 variant. "Cold-like symptoms is not a cold anymore, it could very well be Covid-19 so have them tested, have them stay home, have them tested by calling the Department of Health," she said.

Ms. Berry-Benjamin said that returning to in-person classes will require students to comply with the mask mandate and they will also have to adjust to health safety protocols which will include complying with decals and social distancing on the school bus and cafeterias.

“We were able to purchase the decals for our floors, so our students know to socially distance. The sanitizers for our restrooms, soap and soap dispensers as well as we went as far as hand-washing stations and bottle-filling stations,” Ms. Berry-Benjamin disclosed.

“We are in discussions with partners to upgrade our electrical systems so that we could have automatic sinks and toilets — all of that is future depending on our electrical upgrades, but all these things that we have invested in... like plexiglass for the desks are to make sure our students and teachers are safe,” she said.

In terms of bus transportation, Mr. Somme said, “It’s going to be two students per seat. In the past depending on the size of the child we could get three or four but because of Covid-19 and now the presence of Omicron it’s two students per seat and that is important because we want to make sure they can maintain some degree of social distancing on the school bus.”

If a child forgets his or her mask, the bus companies will have masks available so they can give a child who may have forgotten his or her mask at home, the Education officials said.

With regards to school meals, Mr. Somme said that the schools will be serving meals in cafeterias. “We are going back to what we did before which is serving meals in our cafeterias. That, of course, will look different in that you still have to maintain your social distancing,” he said.

“I imagine that many schools will have to have more than one lunch period, particularly our larger schools so that they can accommodate that social distancing. So, you don’t have the entire school having one lunch period because next thing you know we have an outbreak of some sort,” Mr. Somme Said.