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Education Commissioner Racquel Berry-Benjamin Submits Resignation to Governor Bryan

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Former Education Commissioner Racquel Berry-Benjamin.

Governor Albert Bryan on Monday accepted the resignation of Education Commissioner Racquel Berry-Benjamin, effective immediately, Government House has announced.

Mr. Bryan named Assistant Commissioner of Education Victor Somme as Acting Commissioner until he can nominate a permanent commissioner.

“I want to thank Commissioner Berry-Benjamin for her work in this Administration and particularly for her efforts to keep the students learning during the extreme difficulties brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic and the task of creating a virtual learning system almost overnight,” Governor Bryan said. “I have confidence in Mr. Somme’s ability to bring us into the successful

start of school just months away, and I've tasked the Education Department leadership with looking ahead to the post-pandemic landscape that has changed school systems across the nation."

The Consortium, citing sources with knowledge of the matter, reported [last week](#) that Ms. Berry-Benjamin would soon resign.

From the outset of her tenure, the commissioner has faced opposition based on concerns over whether she could run the massive department. In February 2019, her nomination [was held in committee](#) by senators who expressed skepticism with her level of readiness. Her chances received a boost after Governor Bryan [publicly threw his weight](#) behind her. "I have full confidence that Commissioner Berry-Benjamin, and our District Insular Superintendents, along with DOE's Operations team, our teachers and the rest of the DOE staff will ensure a safe and conducive school environment for our students this school year," the governor said, contending that the problems that plagued the education system were not caused by his administration, which was new at the time, and he reminded the public of the devastating effects of Hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017.

Her nomination was approved, and Ms. Berry-Benjamin powered through what has been a challenging three years managing one of the highest funded departments, with both successes and challenges. Her relationship with the Senate Committee of Education and Workforce Development chair, Sen. Genevieve Whitaker — which recently spilled over into a public spat over the department's attendance at Senate hearings — has been tumultuous.

Ms. Berry-Benjamin's tenure was compounded and marked by the Covid-19 pandemic, having to shift from in-person learning to virtual instruction in short order while overseeing all the intricacies of the monumental change. Some have rated her efforts with virtual learning a success; others have said the results were mixed.

The commissioner also had to contend with determined students across the territory who [fought fiercely in 2021 for a seated graduation, contending that](#) such events could be safely conducted. The department refused to budge and instead held walk-through graduations across the USVI.

More recently, [protests were held territory-wide](#) and were sold as efforts to bring attention to what organizers said were major issues affecting learning in public schools.

During the protests, which were held in April, AFT president on St. Croix, Rosa Soto-Thomas said it is important that the public knows "many children are attending mold-infested classrooms which are inadequately ventilated with broken, non-existing AC units. Classrooms and activity centers are extremely hot. Students' learning conditions and educators' working environments are subpar."

Ms. Soto-Thomas added, "We are demanding updated information from the Bryan-Roach administration as to the plans to fix and retrofit out schools and facilities. When will the new cafeteria equipment be installed? What is the status of Arthur Richards School? Where is the GVI with the Masterplan of Schools and Facilities? Where are we with our contracts? When will construction of the nine classrooms at Claude O. Markoe School be erected? The district of St. Croix is still without an insular superintendent, a post which critically needs to be filled."

The St. Thomas-St. John district AFT president, Leontyne Jones said she visited every public school "and there is not one school without outstanding issues that affect educators' abilities to instruct students effectively."

