

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Bryan Administration Commissioners No-Show at Hearing to Respond to Annual Public Schools Assessment Report; VIVA Program Criticized by Board of Education

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At the St. Croix Educational Complex, the "entire facility" was found to have leaking pipes, while the male locker rooms and restrooms featured exposed wiring and holes dug into the concrete walls, according to a Board of Education report. By. ERNICE GILBERT, VI CONSORTIUM

Point persons in the Department of Education and other ancillary government departments were not on hand on Friday to answer pressing questions about the state of

education in the U.S Virgin Islands from members on the Committee on Education and Workforce Development, chaired by Sen. Genevieve Whitaker.

Dept. of Planning and Natural Resources Commissioner Jean-Pierre L. Oriol; Dept. of Public Works Commissioner Derek Gabriel; and Dept. of Labor Commissioner Gary Molloy, as well as Victor Somme III, the acting commissioner the Dept. of Education and other key staff members needed to participate in the discussion, all submitted absentee letters excusing themselves from the first hearing since the V.I. Board of Education released [a disturbing report on an assessment of public schools](#).

Senators were unable to ask questions regarding the agencies' plans to remedy those problems identified in the 179-page report which indicated that a number of schools in the territory were unfit for purpose and should be demolished to align with up-to-date health and safety standards.

The report also spoke of the implementation of a Virgin Island Virtual Academy (VIVA) which the Board of Education said was not authorized for the purpose it is being used for.

According to Board of Education Executive Director Stephanie Berry, Education, the board has asked the Department of Education on numerous occasions to refrain from using the policy improperly.

"We met with the VIVA team from the department and the board expressed their concerns about it not being implemented in a manner that we expected," she said, adding that "the board also told the department that given what they represented, that they would not support an opportunity for them to continue this VIVA academy without additional information being provided to the board."

"The board is adamant that we need more information and we made that clear to the board," Ms. Berry stressed.

The department [during a Nov. 2021 press conference](#) announced VIVA as a pilot program to establish a permanent online school as part of the department's educational product. It launched in Jan. 2022 with about 200 students between grades 6 and 12.

Senator Donna Frett-Gregory suggested that a strong message be sent to the Department of Education about their implementation of policies that already have set guidelines.

"I cannot continue to participate in this conversation with regards to how our schools are maintained. We see the situation; it has been tested and tried and it hasn't worked. It's time for us to change the narrative," she said.

"The Board of Education has a lot more teeth, make your voices heard," Ms. Frett-Gregory encouraged. "Take them to court, do what you have to do. That's how I see it at this point [but] this has to stop," she senator insisted, adding that the Department of Education cannot "arbitrarily" decide that they are going to setup a virtual school when there has never been an established virtual school in the Virgin Islands.

To further complicate the matter, the board said that it could not get majority of the agencies which were legally obligated to file reports to do so. It noted that the Fire Service and the Department of Health were the only two ancillary agencies that responded to the Board of Education's request for a comprehensive assessment and evaluation of all public schools. The Departments of Planning and Natural Resources and the V.I. Dept. of Public Works failed to perform as requested.

Emmanuella Perez-Cassius, chair of the School Plant Committee Facility believes that legal changes are required for the board to enforce the policies on the books. She said the language in law needs to be specific to begin to make a difference.

"A lot of these matters are really legislative matters and language matters and I really think that accountability is very important. Right now our standard that we have in the law does not provide clear accountability," she explained.

"The Legislature can ensure, through language in some of these legislative lines, that the agencies must report to the Board of Education by this date, specifically the commissioner of Education must report to the Board of Education. Right now the suggestive language that is in the law allows for people to choose or not choose whether they want to participate in this process," she continued.

In the report, the Fire Department also stated that a majority of the institutions it assessed had at least one health violation.

Sen. Whitaker, the chair of the Committee on Education and Workforce Development, noted however that none of these violations were reported last school year and cautioned those submitting reports to be truthful.

"The documents that are submitted have to be accurate and the concern particularly from the Fire Service was that last year these concerns that were brought up this year, weren't brought up last year and these issues were already present last year. I don't accept folks submitting reports that are inaccurate," she remarked.

Ms. Whitaker said she is working on giving the Board of Education more power to fulfill its mandate.