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Board of Education Gives Dept. of Education 3 Weeks to Present Information on Virtual Academy

Education / **Published On August 06, 2022 05:55 AM /**

Elesha George **August 06, 2022**

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Virtual learning. By. GETTY IMAGES

Last updated at 3:53 p.m. on Saturday, Aug. 6 2022.

Members of the V.I. Board of Education has given the V.I. Dept. of Education until August 26th to comply with the operational guidelines and to provide proper documentation on the operations of the Virgin Islands Virtual Academy (VIVA).

The board chose not to immediately rescind the program as previously discussed in its last meeting and instead members voted 5/3 to conditionally approve VIVA. The approval may or may not be extended pending the outcome of a review when the board meets in three weeks.

VIVA was designed to be used as an alternative platform for learning when Covid-19 restricted physical interaction but the Board of Education said the education department has not complied with the specifications of the program and has instead turned it into a standalone virtual school.

In making her case for the conditional reopening, Board of Education vice chairman, Winona Hendricks said that disadvantaged students should not be denied the opportunity to learn by other methods.

Ms. Hendricks however insisted that VIVA should remain as an integrated program within the education system for students with medical and special needs, and who are unable to participate in face-to-face learning.

“They cannot be educated by themselves or as an island,” she remarked but noted that more information was needed including the number of students and teachers who would be participating in the VIVA program, the teacher vacancies and the process by which teachers are certified to participate in the virtual program.

In addition to the above, the board has requested that the department outlines who will be in charge of managing VIVA, ensure that participating students are in secondary school, establish an assessment process at the start of the school year, and to comply with distance learning policy particularly curriculum development. The board is inclined to rescind its support of VIVA if this information is not provided.

Before agreeing on the August 26th date, the board was split between applying a strict timeline or giving the department an additional week to present all the documents.

Although Acting St. Croix Superintendent Ercillia Ottley-Herman said giving the department until September 2nd, 2022 would be ideal, a majority of the board members voted against amending the date, citing that the department had already been given enough time to provide the information requested.

In her argument, Ms. Ottley-Herman explained that the department would be in a better position to give more accurate information. “One thing we have to ensure is that we build our student schedules. Once we build our student schedules, we’ll cross check the schedules and the teachers before they’re placed to ensure that we review, as we promised, all of the requirements as well as the vacancies.”

She said the department was still receiving teacher resignations while some educators simply have not shown up with the new school year schedule to begin on Monday August 8.

Board member Judy Gomez, who excused herself from the meeting after the vote, accused the board members who voted against extending the time of “setting the department up to fail” by knowingly denying them the requested time to submit the information.

Meanwhile, no conclusive decision has been made to certify Alternative Ed and the Youth Rehabilitation Center in the new school year since the board said it had not received documentation about the state of these facilities.

Aside from the aforementioned facilities, all St. Croix schools were certified, however schools in the St. Thomas-St. John district have not received certification from the Board of Education, as the board said it did not receive the required reports from the Dept. of Education prior to Friday's meeting.

