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Nearly 200 Teachers and Support Staff Resigned or Retired Ahead of 2022 School Reopening, Leaving Education Department Scrambling to Fill Gap

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A welcome back banner greets students returning to school at the Pearl B. Larsen K-8 School on Aug. 8, 2022. By. V.I. CONSORTIUM

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Many schools in the U.S Virgin Islands opened last week with low staff numbers, resulting from sudden resignations and retirements during the summer period.

Nearly 200 teachers and support staff resigned or retired from the public school education system between June 2022 and August 2022, according to Dr. Dionne Wells-Hedrington, commissioner

designee of the V.I. Department of Education.

“These challenges, especially in the separation that we are experiencing, it’s really because of a misconception that if you resign during the summer months, for some reason people think that they’re not going to be paid and so they wait until the opening of the school year,” she explained.

Melene Cooper-Shelford, acting human resources director said the department has recorded almost 200 separations since the end of the 2022 school year from elementary, special ed and secondary level teachers. That number includes teachers’ assistants and administrative staff.

One parent whose child attends school at the St. Croix Educational Complex facility told the Consortium this week that her daughter went four hours without instruction, with school officials pointing to the lack of educators as the cause.

From June 2022 to as late as this Monday, 99 resignations and retirement letters were submitted by employees in the St. Thomas-St. John district inclusive of support and teaching staff; while 90 people resigned in the St. Croix district. Between August 8th and August 16th, an additional 11 staffers resigned in the St Thomas/St John district.

While 39 local and 20 international staff have been hired to fill some of these vacant positions, many more educators are needed. With the increased number of vacancies, schools have integrated classes and have out of need, unintentionally increased class sizes.

But even that effort leaves a significant shortage of educators, as the department noted that more students have enrolled this school term.

In St. Croix, as of Tuesday registered student were at 5,128 and 5,146 on St. Thomas – a slight increase from last school year's numbers.

The commissioner designee has blamed the high cost of living and the uncompetitive salary for many of those separations. “It really is not comparable with the salaries and that is a huge hindrance to us getting and recruiting teachers into the territory.”

The starting salary for educators in the USVI is just above \$40,000 annually. These salaries are further diminished by deductions from the Government Employees' Retirement System and insurance, resulting in biweekly payments for many educators of just over \$1,000. With inflation — which is essential the fall of one's purchasing power because of the rising cost of goods and services — at its highest level in 40 years, teachers are leaving the field in droves as many find themselves unable to meet their needs.

Ms. Wells-Hedrington said the department is actively working on recruiting retired teachers to help fill vacancies temporarily.

In the meantime, focus is being placed on helping students who were receiving online instruction and who have fallen behind on academics during the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The commissioner designee said she is proposing site-based management where principals would be given more autonomy to create and design strategies to deal with their individual learning loss concerns.

“What we do in one school is going to look different from what we do in another school,” she stated, noting that “principals know their students and so principals know exactly what needs to

happen."

District records for 2022 indicate that students are failing at literacy and mathematics when compared to the period between 2018 and 2019, according to Ms. Cooper-Shelford. She said students will be tested at the end of the first two weeks of school to identify their weak areas.

The Virgin Islands Career and Technical Education is also dealing with its own issues of staff shortage, with VICTE board chairman Michael T. Francois stating that the main challenge is getting individuals to apply to become certified instructors and to want to work with the establishment.

The board also petitioned the Legislature to consider separating its allocation so that it may be able to better deal with immediate operational expenses. It said that authority was taken away from the board when its finances were managed by the Dept. of Education. Its finances are now managed by the ERP system.

"The board no longer has the authority to write a check to cover the expenses needed for the right now repairs and more," he remarked as he continued by proposing that legislators consider appropriating \$250,000 in a fund named after one of its long-standing educators and board members. Lawmakers did not indicate whether they would consider that option.

The V.I. Dept. of Education is seeking an appropriation of \$177.2 million from the General Fund for fiscal year 2023. This sum includes \$118. million for personnel services; \$51 million for fringe benefits; \$5 million for utilities and \$2.2 million under miscellaneous.

The department said it currently manages \$280.2 million in federal grants from the U.S. Department of Education, and \$5.1 million for eight federal grants from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, totaling \$285.39 million.

In fiscal year 2023, the department anticipates receiving approximately \$31,274,609.30 in federal funds: \$25,778,098.69 from the U.S. Dept. of Education, and \$5,496,510.61 from the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture as reimbursable program funds.