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Absenteeism and a Rise in Covid Cases Multiple Already Challenging School Reopening, Education Officials Say

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An empty classroom. By. GETTY IMAGES

While the 2022/2023 school year continues to be plagued by a shortage of professional educators, a rise in in-school Covid-19 cases, and truancy — the action of staying away from school without good reason — have compounded the challenges of the V.I. Department of Education.

With the exit of hundreds of teachers, and while the department is trying to encourage retired teachers to return, Dr. Dionne Wells-Hedrington, D.O.E. commissioner nominee noted that 138 teachers have become eligible for separation. It is a stark reality that has been intensified by other germane factors which plague the territory's education system.

In its latest update before the Legislature on Monday, Education officials testified that 21 positive cases of Covid-19 and 21 cases of close contact have so far been recorded territory-wide among students, while 31 students, most noticeably at the lowest grade levels, had withdrawn from school.

To keep the coronavirus at bay, Victor Somme III, assistant commissioner of the department said 300 test kits are on hand and 2,000 additional test kits have been ordered through the V.I. Department of Health. The most recent rise in pockets of the virus has emerged particularly in the St. Thomas-St John District, according to Mr. Somme.

Meanwhile, Ericilda Ottley-Herman, St. Croix insular superintendent shared that the department is currently advertising vacancies for truant officers on St. Croix to assist with increasing the attendance rate. "Our lowest grade level right now in terms of attendance this week is Kindergarten," she remarked.

"We're seeing the highest attendance at our high school level in terms of our 9th, 10th and 11th and 12th grades. Our elementary students, more so, we have to work closely with our attendance counsellors," she noted, adding that attendance is going up.

Still, students represent almost five times the number of staff employed by D.O.E., with a ratio of 2,207 staff members to 10,198 students. That disparity does little to remedy the pervasiveness of persistent violence at schools. The department said it had however been in talks with the V.I. Police Department and Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST) to assign some school monitors as peace keepers to aid the situation.

Mr. Somme said discussions had been ongoing for three years to develop a School Security Bureau within the Department of Education. "We're talking about a proposal to create a School Security Bureau within the [V.I. Dept. of Education] as well as [Police Commissioner Ray Martinez's] offer for some of our monitors to become auxiliary police."

Senator Kenneth Gittens, expressing support for the idea, said it would have to be legislated. He said the School Security Bureau with auxiliary police officers would remove the authority from monitors to search students who are accused of serious offenses – an act that police officers are not permitted to do.

The prohibition of searching students is much like arresting them as a way to restrain them. It was Mr. Gittens who spoke about the illegalities with this practice which led Mr. Somme to declare that handcuffing of students should not happen until there is a policy to guide it.

"It was more a concern with visitors to school campuses who then come in and cause confusion. We needed a way to restrain them so they didn't add any chaos or cause any further injury to students," Mr. Somme explained.

Mrs. Wells-Hedrington said the department is working hard to improve the level of education offered to students in the territory.