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Territory's Schools in Learning Loss State of Emergency, Superintendent Says; Education Officials Plot Remedial Strategies

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Apart from dealing with the chronic teacher shortage, Department of Education officials are also trying to come up with strategies to address learning loss and lagging attendance at the student level. Department heads spoke to senators on the Senate Committee on Education and Workforce Development on Thursday about the challenges that they've had in this regard, and plans to resolve them leading into the next school year.

According to Insular Superintendent for the St. Croix District Ericilda Ottley-Herman, there is still work that needs to be done to bring students up to the standards of their grade level. "We are in a state of not just triage but emergency when it comes to the skill deficit of our students," she said.

These deficits require additional strategies particularly in the high schools, Ms. Ottley-Herman explained. “Teachers need to be able to kind of model more around the skills and strategies. We’re seeing where students have to have more explicit instruction and the gradual release.”

“Those models are usually found at the elementary level and so now we have to build the secondary teacher skills and strategies around how do you implement that,” Ms. Ottley continued.

Meanwhile, Dr. Stefan Jürgen, insular superintendent for St. Thomas-St. John told lawmakers that education stakeholders have met previously to discuss ways to address the issue of students going into university and having to take skills courses. “That work needs to continue but we did start the dialogue about the real things we can do in both of our programs to help our students succeed,” Dr. Jürgen added.

One key aspect for test-taking students is to ensure that they can complete online standardized exams without internet interruption. While tests continue to ensure that internet connections are reliable, Mr. Jürgen says that his district will take their exams using a staggered approach. “We’ve tested our equipment and we’re very concerned that it’s going to interrupt testing so what we’ve done is that we’ve split the district in half and so all of the schools in the country will test next week starting Monday and then the schools in town will test the following week,” said the St. Thomas/St. John superintendent.

Co-curricular activities will also form part of the reform of education strategies. For example, Commissioner of Education Dr. Dionne Wells-Hedrington says the department plans to revitalize the Communications Art Showcase and older programs that have proven to help students expand and grow their English and mathematical skills over the decades.

Could these types of activities work to increase lagging attendance numbers? Although slightly improved from last school year, students are not coming to school at the desired 95 percent level across the territory. “Our attendance is on the rise but it’s just not where we want it to be,” remarked Ms. Ottley-Herman. According to her, only certain schools have been able to achieve consistently high attendance. High school students in the 12th grade have demonstrated the highest attendance rate of 93 percent.

“Highschoolers go to school...they’re the highest rates in the St. Croix District and then 8th grade with approximately 90 percent,” she said.

It is those at the beginning of their educational journey – kindergarteners – who remain out of school in the largest numbers. Ms. Ottley-Herman theorized that low attendance could be due to the impact of the RSV and Covid-19 viruses, which are circulating in communities.

“In the St. Croix District, Kindergarten again remains our lowest - especially for this month but so far overall – it’s our lowest grade level at 84 percent,” Ms. Ottley-Herman told senators. “Children who don’t bring themselves to school, that is where our attendance rates are the lowest,” she Ottley-Herman noted.

Meanwhile, school safety and security improvements are ongoing. Repairs are being made to kitchens at several schools on St. Croix, especially regarding fire and life safety when it comes to electrical components and gas lines.

According to Mrs. Wells-Hedrington, work has begun at the Claude O. Markoe Elementary School, and another contractor has been selected to upgrade the kitchen at Eulalie Rivera PK8. Upgrade work in the kitchens at St. Croix Central High School, John H. Woodson Junior High

School, Juanita Gardine PK8 School, Lew Muckle Elementary School, and Ricardo Richards Elementary School will also soon be underway.

The upgrades are expected to improve health and hygiene in the kitchens, provide safe electrical and gas utilities, improve grease traps, and provide proper equipment drainage. The interior surfaces will also be refurbished to reduce porous surfaces, repair cracks, and seal openings to reduce the spread of diseases such as Covid-19.

In addition, a design and build Request For Proposals (RFP) is being prepared to build security fencing and, in some cases, perimeter walls at schools in the St. Thomas/St. John District.

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