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The 'Scary' Exodus: Higher Wages Coming, Yet Teachers Leave in Droves as Schools Shrink - An In-depth Dept. of Education Report

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During Tuesday's marathon session, the Senate Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance focused on the Department of Education. As is customary, the block began with a report from Education Commissioner Dr. Dionne Wells-Hedrington, who outlined the performance of the Department during this fiscal year and broke down the budgeting for fiscal year 2024.

Next year's funding request is \$174,300,650, a scant 0.01% increase from the amount appropriated for FY 2023. An additional \$500,000 appropriation from the Tourism Fund brings the total to \$174,800,650.

Enrollment for 2022-2023 was 10,166 students, continuing the ongoing downward trend in the territory's school-age population which began even prior to the hurricanes of 2017. "The census data corresponds to the decline in the population of the Virgin Islands," Wells-Hedrington noted.

Meanwhile, the requested sum for personnel services represents a 2% increase over last year's figure despite a drop in the number of full time employees. The increase in starting salaries for teachers is one of the contributing factors in that increase. Bachelor's degree holders will now begin at just over \$49,000, while holders of master's degrees will now start at over \$51,000.

Commissioner Wells-Hedrington noted that D.O.E. still struggled with a high turnover rate, with a total of 121 employees, including 55 teachers, leaving the department's employ during the 2022-2023 school year. As of May 28, the department had received over 35 retirement or resignation letters across the territory. As of this week, 268 employees across the department have reached retirement age, including 118 teachers, Wells-Hedrington reported.

Following the commissioner's testimony, lawmakers began to probe various aspects of the department's proposed financing, as well as the current state of the sector. Senator Angel Bolques Jr. noted that about 270 employees earn less than \$31,000 annually in base pay, expressing concerns about how the rising cost of living might impact those employees' bottom line. Wells-Hedrington said that she shared the senator's concern, but explained that the issue was rooted in the terms of collective bargaining agreements. "We cannot get people to come into the department to fill those areas because we're not paying them sufficiently," she said, promising to investigate when those bargaining units would be open for renegotiation.

Bolques also drew attention to outstanding obligations, some of which date back to 2018. In response, Wells-Hedrington expressed frustration over the issue. "I find it very unfair that contractors who provided services to this department from 2013 have not been paid," she admitted.

This comment sparked a lively debate with Donna Frett-Gregory, the chair of the committee. Frett-Gregory expressed confusion over the department's claims of outstanding obligations, pointing out that the Legislature approved millions to cover these expenses. She urged the commissioner to look into the issue further.

Senate President Novelle Francis raised questions about school safety, asking if funds were being "set aside or earmarked for metal detectors in our schools," to which Michal Rhymer-Browne, drogram director for federal grants on St. Croix, responded in the affirmative. "In our federal grants, we have allotted for metal detectors for schools that will be ADA accessible and in compliance," Rhymer-Browne said. "Intercom systems, yes."

Victor Somme III, assistant commissioner of education, also highlighted a commitment to staff training on the issue. He noted that a "three-day school monitor professional development retreat on the island of St. Croix" had just been completed. He explained that the 84 attendees received training in CPR and first aid, as well as guidance from Louisiana State University on mass attacks.

Addressing concerns about behavioral health for students and staff, Wells-Hedrington referred to ongoing conversations with the Department of Health about a potential partnership that would provide additional support to campuses. However, Francis wondered whether the Department of Education might be better served by having its own resources. "After we finish with this round, we do plan to revisit the ARPA funding," Wells-Hedrington responded, indicating a potential shift in resource allocation in order to implement the idea. A question from the Senate president revealed that most of the teacher needs were in math, science and special education, prompting

education officials to acknowledge the need to urgently address the loss of teachers in these critical areas.

Senator Carrion then voiced his concern over the significant number of individuals in the department who are eligible for retirement, calling the situation "alarming."

In response, Wells-Hedrington agreed that the situation is indeed "scary" and "uneasy," but assured the senator that D.O.E. has a succession plan. "One of the things that we have started that the districts are going to continue is succession planning. So should the principal leave, we have qualified assistant principals that could take those positions," Wells-Hedrington explained. She also mentioned that the department is examining staffing numbers closely to ensure that all students have a qualified professional instructing them.

Additionally, Desha Powell, deputy superintendent of the St. Thomas-St. John District, provided further details on the department's partnership with the University of the Virgin Islands, which is working to prepare students for future leadership and education roles. "We actually have librarians that are graduating...in May of next year," Ms. Powell told lawmakers. "We actually have a program with counselors, school psychologists and we also have a powers to pros program where our power professionals and some of our other support staff can enter the university and take courses in education," she added.

Carrion also questioned the department's representatives about an unused federal grant. \$222,000 was awarded in 2019 for the Eudora Kean High School's JROTC drill pad covering project. "What's the status on that? Because it's \$222,000. Nothing has been used a few years now. And we're about to lose that money. Is there a plan to have an extension?" he asked.

Both Chief Operating Officer Alan Fleming and Wells-Hedrington acknowledged the delay but didn't provide a definite status update, stating that their in-house engineer was working on the project. "We could get back to you on that," Mr. Fleming replied, while Wells-Hedrington added, "Yeah, so we can request an extension. I'm actually trying to get an update...before I respond, because I'm pretty sure there's more clarity needed in that particular area."

Senator Kenneth Gittens also had concerns about whether the department would lose any already awarded federal dollars because it was not spending the money fast enough. Wells-Hedrington reassured him as well. "We have some federal funding in the amount of 26 million... But we're not going to lose anything," she stated emphatically. "I'm not going to put that out there. No, we have pretty tight spending plans that we are monitoring very closely."

Regarding the over \$140 million received from the U.S. Department of Education as Covid-19 support, officials revealed spending plans primarily focusing on safety and health measures. Rhymer-Browne, speaking about the St. Croix district, highlighted expenditure on "generators, professional development for supplemental materials, metal detectors, and emergency vehicles," along with support for private schools.

Meanwhile Powell, discussing the St. Thomas St. John district, outlined that the remaining funds from the awarded \$25 million in CARES Act grant would be spent on "cleaning supplies, workbooks for students, outdoor furniture, cleaning generators, AC units, gardening tools and equipment for schools, technology resources, and safety equipment."

Wells-Hedrington addressed Gittens's appeal for a greater focus on regular maintenance and updates to school infrastructure and resources, in which he specifically mentioned the need for generators at schools. She promised to assess funding for "big ticket" items like replacing school

infrastructure, hinting at using ARPA funds to facilitate these changes. "I don't see why we can't have that amendment to the existing plan for the ARPA funding," she said.

Gittens further inquired about the availability of school nurses. In response, Somme III mentioned that there was one school in the St. Thomas district without a nurse, while in the St. Croix district, existing nurses served two schools at one time. The conversation shifted towards the possibility of having medical professionals such as LPNs or EMTs on campus as a suitable alternative to RNs. However, this proposal sparked a debate on the legal and regulatory complexities involved in authorizing LPNs and EMTs to administer medication.

Meanwhile, in response to a query on the decision to give each school a uniform grant of \$250,000, regardless of student population, Deputy Commissioner of Curriculum & Instruction Dr. Renee Charlswell stated that the decision was jointly made with Governor Albert Bryan to help the schools "jumpstart their own initiatives." She added that the funds were tied to the school improvement process, giving schools flexibility to allocate funds based on unique needs.

"Schools are getting the \$250,[000], [but] it does not limit the district's involvement in providing additional resources," Charlswell said. This approach allows schools to tailor resources like professional development to individual school needs, as opposed to district-wide requirements.

However, some members of the committee raised concerns over the equity of this approach. Sen. Frett-Gregory argued that the allocation of funds must consider the size of the student population in each school. She cited the difference between Joseph Sibilly school with over 200 students and Charlotte Amalie High School with over 900 students as an example.

"We have to be a little more thoughtful in how we allocate dollars to schools," Frett-Gregory asserted, suggesting that the uniform allocation doesn't account for the varied needs of the schools based on their population.

Department officials responded that these were one-time funds and that schools would receive other support that would not come out of their allotment.

Sen. Javan James asked officials to explain the \$1.6 million jump in the budgeted cost of the Summer Food Service Program – from \$2.1 million in FY 2023 to \$3.7 million proposed for the upcoming financial year. "That's a big jump," he remarked, emphasizing that he was not against state-funded meal programs for school-age children. He also expressed concern about the equitable distribution of the program across schools and asked for clarity on the specific use of the funds.

Committee Chair Senator Donna Frett-Gregory expressed similar confusion about the jump in cost. She clarified that the Summer Food Service Program is federally funded and there is no requirement for a local match. However, she questioned the funding source for hiring individuals for the summer feeding program.

Belinda Sanderson, director of special nutrition, explained that the state agency has federal funds and a small local allotment, not a match, to assist with hiring. She also agreed with Frett-Gregory's assertion that the proposed budget increase was probably incorrect.

Recognizing playgrounds as vital spaces for children's physical and mental health, James also probed about the funds allocated for their regular maintenance. In her response, Wells-Hedrington confessed that while past practices may have overlooked this essential aspect, the department was making a concerted effort to ensure that future maintenance provisions were built into the budget.

"Moving forward, we want to ensure that a component is there for the maintenance upkeep," she stated, committing to taking necessary actions.

The mostly convivial discussion took a more somber turn when chairperson Frett-Gregory disclosed the potential for a \$1.2 million reduction in special education funding. It appeared that the proposal for this reduction was based on the perceived lack of growth in the student population requiring such services. Responding to this unsettling disclosure, Charleswell, deputy commissioner of curriculum and instruction, assured the committee of her ongoing efforts to stave off this potential reduction. She emphasized the crucial need for local support, a clarion call for all to rally together to address this issue.

Senator Carla Joseph, meanwhile, peppered officials with questions about how well the department was in compliance with the statutory mandate that the Career Technical Education (CTE) Board manages the Perkins funds. "Assistant Commissioner [Somme] has been appointed by me as a representative to attend the current technical education board meetings," Dr. Wells-Hedrington responded. "He's responsible for oversight over that division." For his part, Somme confirmed that the Perkins fund had accumulated approximately \$1.7 million.

The discussion then turned to the need for vocational education in the territory, with Frett-Gregory asking for more details about the department's ongoing initiatives and potential challenges. Somme confirmed the existence of pre-career technical education in junior high and middle schools and CTE pathways in secondary programs.

Frett-Gregory also expressed concerns over [the relationship](#) between the department and the CTE board. "I think most of it is what we need to really work on," she said, indicating that it wasn't merely about gaining control of funds but enhancing the collaboration for the benefit of students.

Dr. Renee Charles clarified why the CTE board doesn't manage the Perkins grant. "The reason that the CTE board doesn't manage the Perkins grant is due to mismanagement. The U.S. Department of Education removed it from the board because of their fiscal structure."

To ensure that the students are not affected by the inter-departmental issues, Frett-Gregory asked the Education commissioner about her commitment to inclusivity and collaboration. Wells-Hedrington responded, "We definitely need to be more inclusive in that process... You have the commitment from me that my team will do so in the next grant cycle."