

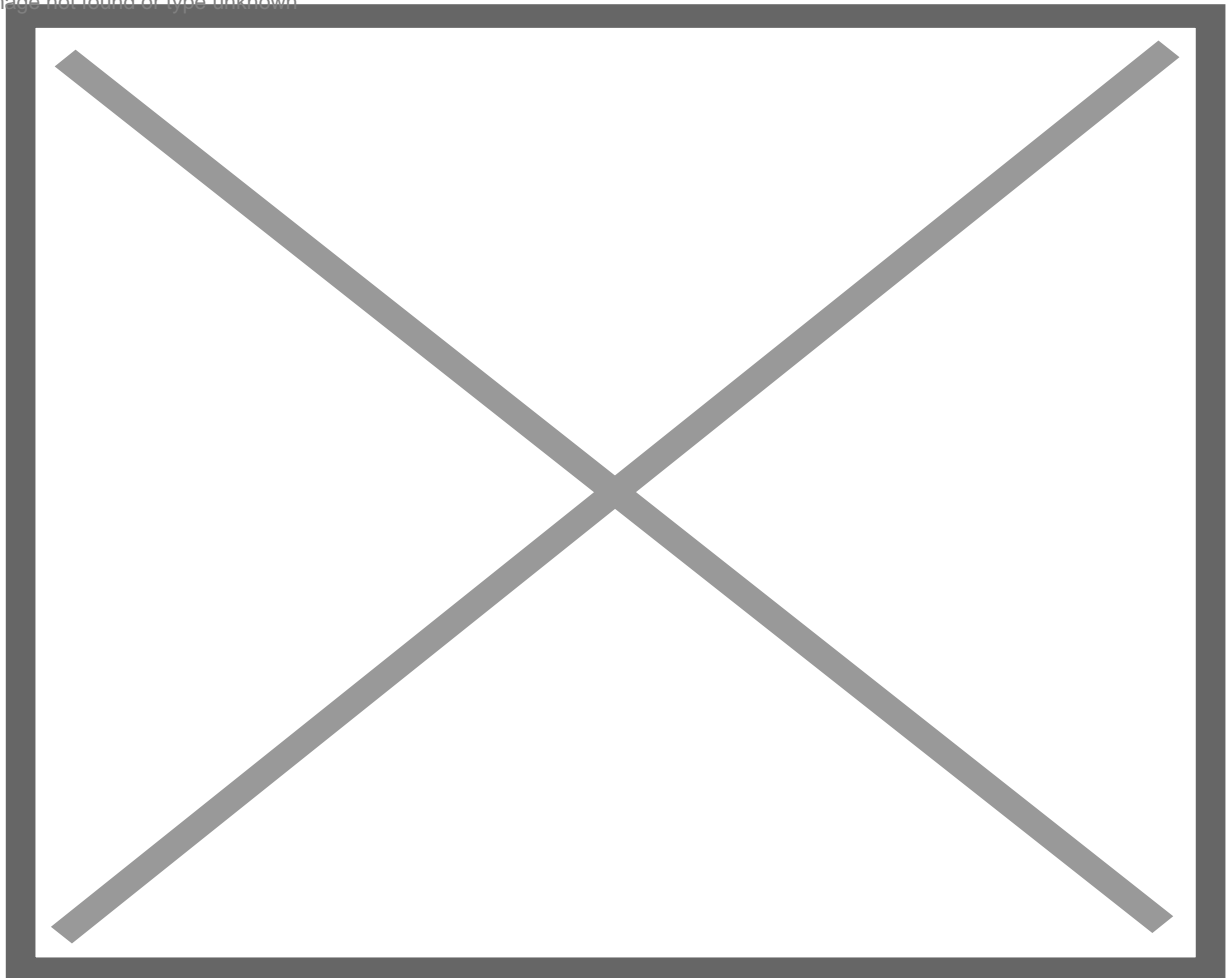
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Delayed Health Report Needed to Reopen Schools Adds to Dept. of Education's Staff Losses, Student Growth Woes

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V.I. Department of Education Commissioner Dr. Dionne Wells-Hedrington on Monday highlighted the recent loss of 65 education professionals in the USVI public school system, a longstanding challenge that has been strained further by St. Croix's rising student population.

Amid the challenges, the department has yet to receive a crucial readiness report from the V.I. Dept. of Health needed before schools can open next week.

Regarding the growth in student population on St. Croix, Insular Superintendent for the St. Croix District, Ericilda Ottley-Herman, stated, "This school year, our projected enrollment has shown that every grade level except for our kindergarten...and our second grade has started to see an

upward trajectory," she said Monday while D.O.E. provided testimony before the Senate Committee on Education and Workforce Development.

Wells-Hedrington addressed chronic human resources challenges threatening school districts nationally, drawing attention to the recent loss of over 200 teachers in Florida's Brevard County as an example. Between May 26 and July 21, the territory lost 65 education professionals to resignations or retirements, including 37 from the teaching ranks.

To address this, recruitment efforts include hosting job fairs and hiring international teachers through the J-1 visa exchange program. "We must support our employees," the commissioner insisted, underlining the importance of preventing further departures.

Wells-Hedrington also spoke on the maintenance and repair efforts undertaken by the department in preparation for the upcoming school year. "We believe it is crucial to maintain a conducive and safe environment for our students' growth and development," she told lawmakers.

Among the department's projects were comprehensive maintenance activities like inspecting and cleaning ventilation systems, electrical and plumbing upgrades, classroom renovations, safety enhancements, landscaping, and ground maintenance at public school campuses across the territory.

Mrs. Wells-Hedrington acknowledged that the School Maintenance and Construction Bureau has not yet been operationalized, as the post of executive director still needed to be filled. She noted that while D.O.E. continues to work with FEMA to fund and build new schools, local funding is being utilized for projects that would support the new construction, specifically the Charlotte Amalie High School and the Arthur Richards preK to grade 8 school. These include the demolition of the Evelyn Williams and old Arthur Richards schools, among other education projects with local funding sources.

The commissioner mentioned specific kitchen upgrades at several schools on St. Croix to allow staff to operate safely in a post-Covid, pandemic-aware environment. Students returning to class next week will not enjoy the benefit of the upgrades, at least not yet, as these projects are being addressed within a longer timeframe.

For the St. Croix kitchen renovations, "that contractor is mobilized and ready to go," the commissioner told lawmakers. Kitchen renovation projects at schools in the St. Thomas/St. John District were in earlier stages of planning. "A task order performing detailed assessments is underway," she said.

These projects, Wells-Hedrington said in response to prodding from Senator Franklin Johnson, are expected to be completed before the end of 2024. "It's a process and it takes time," she stated, explaining that attracting bidders on the contracts has been difficult, and that after review, more work was needed for the kitchens than was previously anticipated due to electrical and plumbing requirements, as well as the need to have all work done according to code.

The commissioner's response to Senator Marvin Blyden's question about the school kitchen renovation project revealed that D.O.E. is still awaiting a readiness report from the Department of Health one week before classes resume.

St. Thomas-St. John Superintendent of Schools, Dr. Stefan Jürgen provided updates on consolidation within this district, including the renovation of locations, the merge of certain schools, changes in student attendance for different grades, and the addition of new classes and special education rooms at various schools.

