



THE VIRGIN ISLANDS DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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EDUCATION COMMISSIONER PROVIDES FIRST IN SERIES OF UPDATES ON REOPENING OF PUBLIC SCHOOL BUILDINGS FOR 2020-2021 SCHOOL YEAR

ST. THOMAS, USVI – Department of Education Commissioner Racquel Berry-Benjamin on June 18 provided the first in a series of planned updates on the Department’s preparation for the start of the 2020-2021 school year.

During a live session on Facebook, Berry-Benjamin announced that a taskforce comprised of representatives from the Department of Education, Department of Health, Board of Education, Government House, and other stakeholder groups has been formed to ensure the safe reopening of the territory’s public schools.

She went on to say that while school buildings are expected to reopen for the 2020-2021 school year, what that looks like will depend on the impact of the coronavirus in the territory in the coming months.

“It is a definite that our school buildings will re-open and I think it’s also understood that school will look different from what we know it to be,” Berry-Benjamin said. “We have explored a variety of options, such as one hundred percent online learning or a blended/hybrid model of online and in-person learning. The model that will be used will be decided at the appropriate time.”

Berry-Benjamin describes the initial return to school campuses as a “soft opening” to help students and staff get acclimated to the changes that will be implemented.

“This will give us the opportunity to go through the necessary processes and procedures with our students so they are able to learn the new norm on their campuses, such as how to greet each other and their teachers while socially distancing because of COVID-19,” she said.

As for 100 percent online instruction, which was implemented in March when the territory's schools closed due to the coronavirus, Berry-Benjamin said it is the last option the Department would consider for the upcoming school year.

"We will use this option only if we have no other choice due to the spread of the coronavirus in our community at that time," she said. "That would be our last option because we want our students, particularly our youngest learners, to be in our schools interacting with their teachers for their educational needs."

Close to \$20 million in CARES Act funding has been allocated to the V.I. Department of Education from Congress in response to COVID-19. The funds, Berry-Benjamin said, will be distributed to both school districts, including non-public schools, to secure a range of products and services.

"Some of the most important uses of those funds are to purchase the necessary technology for our students and teachers, as well as to purchase personal protective equipment, such as sanitizers, soap dispensers and masks," she said. "Mental health counseling and other related services will also be secured to ensure the overall health and wellness of our students."

Berry-Benjamin noted that the CDC has issued specific guidelines that govern the number of students that can ride in a school bus at a given time, as well as that student meals would be served in disposable containers and eaten in their classrooms.

Within the next week, the Department will release a series of surveys to assess the needs of teachers, parents and students.

Weekly updates on the reopening of public schools and other Department of Education announcements will be made at 3:30 p.m. Wednesdays on the Department's Facebook page.

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