

LAWMAKERS RECEIVE AN UPDATE ON THE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN THE TERRITORY

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ST. THOMAS- Members of the Committee on Education, Youth and Recreation, chaired by Sen. Jean Forde, held a meeting at the Capitol Building on Thursday, to receive testimony on the current status of the Virgin Islands Department of Education (VIDOE).

“ is facing insurmountable fiscal, administrative and operational challenges,” said Commissioner of Education Sharon McCollum.

Some of the challenges includes continuing deterioration of the physical conditions of the public schools, the need for an additional \$70,000-\$90,000 to complete Capital Improvement Projects in regards to deferred maintenance projects, a reduction of 7,128 meals served in the School Breakfast Program and a total of 98 teacher vacancies in core areas such as Elementary Education, Science and Foreign Language, according to Commissioner McCollum.

“The issues are real. The leaks are real. The issue of mold is real. The lack of equipment in the classrooms are real. The shortage of teachers is real,” said Sen. Forde.

Sen. Novelle Francis asked, “Can you share some of the challenges of the budget cuts as it pertains to the Impact Statement that VIDOE submitted to the Office of Management and Budget?” Muriel Fenton, Director of Financial Reporting and Program Quality Assurance said, “The Impact Statement mainly refers to maintenance needs as well as ongoing contracts such as security and transportation.” Commissioner McCollum added that \$800,000 is set aside for ongoing contracts which leaves very little funds for maintenance projects. “We simply need more money,” said

Commissioner McCollum.

Sen. Neville James said, “The lack of maintenance in the public schools impacts everything because teachers have to work in the classroom. There are schools in the territory that are almost 50 years old that requires an upgraded infrastructure.” Sen. James continued, “My focus really is to get a better financial foundation so that improvements can be made in the Department of Education.”

Separately, Sen. Forde asked, “What were the findings of the audit?” In response, Colleen Williams, Insular Superintendent of the St. Croix District said, “We have a chief financial officer who oversees the finances of the schools. Overall, principals are doing well with following the guidelines in terms of spending.” Dionne Wells-Hendrington, Insular Superintendent of the St. Thomas-St. John District stated that they had a similar report. “Are the reports of the audit made public?” asked Sen. Forde. Commissioner McCollum stated that all of the reports are public and can be distributed upon request.

Despite VIDOE funding deficiencies, academically, students are showing signs of improvement in English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics.

Sen. Brian Smith asked, “How does the student’s 2016 Smarter Balanced Assessments differ from 2015?” “In ELA, the percent of students that met or exceeded standards as of Spring 2016 was 20%, which is an increase of three percentage points from the 2015 for the Smarter Balanced Assessments,” said Alexandria Baltimore-Hookfin, Director of State Assessment. She added that the percentage of students who fell in the lowest performance category in Math has decreased as well.

“Are we meeting requirements in terms of having sufficient ELA teachers in the classrooms?” asked Sen. Smith. In response, Colleen Williams, Insular Superintendent of the St. Croix said currently there are a shortage of teachers. However, VIDOE has purchased online learning resources to accommodate students with ELA.”

Similarly, Sen. Tregenza Roach asked, “What is the status of the nursing vacancies?” Commissioner McCollum said, “We are being creative by utilizing retired nurses who are happy to come on board.”

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