34TH LEGISLATURE OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Chair of Committee

GENEVIEVE R. WHITAKER

THE VIRGIN ISLANDS DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

Testimony

certification on the reopening of schools as per Title 17 Chapter 3 Section 24 subsections

(a)(2)(A) and (B)
Good day,Honorable Senator Genevieve R. Whitaker, Chair of the Committee on Education and Workforce Development, Honorable Senator Janelle K. Sarauw, Vice-Chair, all other members of the 34th Legislature of the Virgin Islands of the United States and the listening and viewing audience. I am Justa E. Encarnacion, Commissioner of the VI Department of Health (VIDOH). I have here with me today, Dr. Nicole Craigwell-Syms, Assistant Commissioner; Attorney Dwayne Henry, Legal Counsel; and Wanson Harris, Director of Environmental Health. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the annual assessment for the reopening of schools as per Title 17 Chapter 3 Section 24 subsections (a)(2)(A) and (B).

The education system, the students and their parents have been severely challenged by this pandemic. As schools have had to turn to virtual learning, many studies are demonstrating the adverse impact on student achievement. Concerns have been raised that this impact may be difficult to remedy, potentially leaving our children ill prepared to meet the demands of our 21st century workforce. The Department of Health has worked closely with the Department of Education from the beginning of this pandemic with increased intensity from June 2020 to assist them in preparation for a time when in-person classes can begin.

Out of this collaboration came Governor Albert Bryan’s Taskforce on re-opening schools led by Chief of Staff Karl Knight and Shauna Bass, the Governor’s Policy Advisor on Education and Workforce Development and included representatives from Government House, Department of Education’s leadership, teachers, and nurses, and Department of Health. Subsequently, the 2020-2021 Reopening of Schools Guideline was released which outlined the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the VIDOH’s COVID-19 mitigation guidelines (a copy has been included with this testimony). To ensure health and safety guidelines were fully understood, the
Department of Health educated the dietary staff, school nurses and other support staff. Several school nurses have been N95 fitted and trained in swabbing and BiNAX testing.

Once the vaccine became available, Department of Education staff was placed into the 1B phase and VITEMA has been working to schedule those who agree to be vaccinated.

School Assessment: Last week DOH’s Environmental Health team joined other agencies and a member of the legislature for inspections of the schools to be opened in St. Croix. In a preliminary report shortfalls noted were repairs needed in the kitchen at the Juanita Gardine Elementary school, and replacement of desks at the St. Croix Educational Complex for Arthur Richards K-8 which will be housed there when it begins in person classes. Inspections in St. Thomas are planned for the coming week.

The Biden/Harris and the Bryan/Roach administrations are determined to get our children and young people back in the classroom. If our positivity rate continues to be below 5% and we attain Governor Bryan’s goal of vaccinating 50,000 unique VI residents by July 1, 2021, we will be well on our way of achieving herd immunity. Our children will be able to once again benefit not only from in-person classes, but from the socialization that is also an important part of their education.

As always, I would like to thank the VIDOH staff for their strong support of the COVID-19 Mission. In conclusion, Senator Whitaker, the Department of Health is committed to reducing health risks, increasing access to quality healthcare, and enforcing health standards. The Department commits to continued collaborative efforts with the members of the 34th Legislature and we thank you for the support you give in our efforts to improve healthcare in our community. I welcome the opportunity to respond to any questions you may have.