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Education grilled about 2020 budget increase despite school consolidation

By ELLIOTT DAVIS Daily News Staff 3 hrs ago



Racquel Berry-Benjamin

Photo by LEGITV

Senators from the Finance Committee grilled V.I. Education Department leaders Thursday on St. Croix about their proposed budget for fiscal year 2020, with some concerns being aired about the year-over-year increase despite the consolidation of schools following the 2017 hurricanes.

V.I. Education Commissioner Racquel Berry-Benjamin and other representatives defended a proposed budget of just under \$180 million, which is an approximately \$7.4 million increase over last year.

The proposed budget includes \$103 million for personnel services, \$4 million for supplies and \$5.8 million for utilities.

During her testimony, Berry-Benjamin noted that the department has 94 teaching vacancies, including 44 on St. Croix and 50 in the St. Thomas-St. John District. However, 29 new teachers — including 11 on St. Croix — are being welcomed in the next school year.

Sen. Athneil Bobby Thomas noted that despite a shortage of teachers, a decreasing student population, and consolidation of schools overall, the budget still increased for next year.

Berry-Benjamin countered that the increase can be accounted for by budget items such as school maintenance, scholarships, travel and other programs.

Sen. Kurt Vialet, chairman of the Finance Committee, expressed concerns that, with the necessary summer maintenance projects, the schools might not be ready for the 2019-20 year.

“The department is going through a number of changes ... the worst thing that could happen is we’re not ready,” Vialet said, adding that there would be “a lot of screaming” if they are not.

Joseph Sibilly, the territorial facilities manager, assured Vialet that the schools would be ready.

Vialet also asked the Education Department leaders about accreditation status. He asked if Addelita Cancryn Junior High School students being taught on the field at Charlotte Amalie High School had any impact on accreditation status.

Berry-Benjamin said that the Middle States Commission on Higher Education is “aware of the challenges” because of the situation and would “make accommodations necessary.” Asked by Vialet if the Education Department had that assurance in writing, Berry-Benjamin said she would check.

Sen. Donna Frett-Gregory described the education budget as “very interesting.”

“The overall budget book for 2020 has been quite an experience for us as legislators,” Frett-Gregory added.

But Frett-Gregory said she would go straight to her “pet peeve” — the small number of public kindergarten classrooms in the territory. There are only two on St. Croix, and zero in the St. Thomas-St. John District, the senator noted. Frett-Gregory said that the classrooms are crucial due to the importance of recognizing cognitive issues “very early on.”

“Let’s get to the root cause,” she added.

Berry-Benjamin assured Frett-Gregory that the kindergarten classrooms are “very important” to the Education Department and they are working to “make it happen.”

Dionne Wells-Hendrington, the chief operating officer for the Education Department, noted the old age of school buildings in discussing the \$3.6 million budgeted for maintenance.

Wells-Hendrington said the funds will be used for routine maintenance and repairs. Additionally, she said that the annex at Charlotte Amalie High School is being “retrofitted” to make up for the closure of the school’s Building B, which has been condemned.

She added that the department is working to “provide a safe and secure facility for our students and our staff.”

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