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Education Officials Host Senate Members for Tour of Preparations In Place for the Safe Reopening of Public-School Campuses

ST. THOMAS, USVI – The Virgin Islands Department of Education hosted members of the 34th Legislature on a tour of 15 of the territory’s public-school campuses on Jan. 26 and 27, revealing CDC-compliant systems schools have set in place for students to safely return to campuses beginning in February.

During the roughly eight-and-a-half-hour tours, Commissioner Racquel Berry-Benjamin reminded the group that schools would not be deemed completely safe to reopen until fixtures, such as automatic soap and hand-sanitizer dispensers, are installed throughout the campuses.

“Once all of the required items are installed, the Department of Health will do a final walkthrough and provide the ultimate approval for schools to safely reopen,” Berry-Benjamin said. “When a school has all its required fixtures, it will open. We will follow this pattern until all schools open.”

The tours were organized in collaboration with the office of Sen. Genevieve Whitaker, chairwoman of the Committee on Education and Workforce Development, and attended by a host of senators and legislative staff, as well as union leaders.

School administrators in both districts showcased their schools’ readiness to safely welcome students back, with colorful signage displaying new social-distancing requirements and safety protocols; plexiglass barriers installed or being installed at teacher and student desks, and front offices; additional handwashing stations; a designated isolation room for students/staff displaying symptoms of COVID-19; and temperature check and sanitization stations.

Highlights of the tours included the revelation that some schools would contain individual grade levels in small clusters with a dedicated entrance and exit into the school building, thus eliminating contact with other students in the school. Other schools have plans to limit contact among students by designating one-directional walking paths on campus. Student meals will be delivered to their classrooms, as cafeterias will remain closed. Schools will also offer after school learning activities for students.

On St. Thomas, the delegation got a first glimpse of the newly established Sugar Apple Preschool at Yvonne Milliner-Bowsky Elementary School. On St. Croix, the group observed a newly installed no-touch water bottle filling station at Pearl B. Larsen K-8. The item, which was donated by a local business, is retrofitted over traditional water fountains and is also installed at Eulalie R. Rivera K-8, Claude O. Markoe Elementary and Arthur A. Richards K-8.

In the Department's planned hybrid instructional model, students in grades K-3, Special Education and Career & Technical Education will return to campuses for in-person instruction; however, parents of students in these groups may also choose to have their children continue learning from home. Students in grades 4-12 will continue virtual learning for the remainder of the 2020-2021 school year.

School administrators say that while the number of students scheduled to return to campuses are modest, they expect attendance numbers to increase as teachers and students settle into the new campus routines.

St. Croix District schools visited during the campus tours included Pearl B. Larsen K-8, Juanita Gardine K-8, Ricardo Richards Elementary, Lew Muckle Elementary, Alfredo Andrews Elementary, Arthur A. Richards K-8 (at St. Croix Educational Complex High School), Eulalie R. Rivera K-8, and Claude O. Markoe Elementary School. In the St. Thomas-St. John District, tours were conducted of Julius E. Sprauve School, Joseph Gomez Elementary, Yvonne E. Milliner-Bowsky Elementary, Joseph Sibilly Elementary, Jane E. Tuitt Elementary, Ulla F. Muller Elementary and Lockart Primary School.

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