



THE VIRGIN ISLANDS DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

**WRITTEN TESTIMONY BY
SHARON ANN MCCOLLUM, Ph.D., COMMISSIONER
BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND
WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT**

January 13, 2016

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Greetings Honorable Chair, Jean A. Forde, members of the Committee on Education and Workforce Development, other members of the 31th Legislature, enclosed is my testimony in response to the Committee's request to provide updates on the Department of Education's activities, facilities and programs to include:

School Environment and Safety on School Campuses, Standardized Testing and Student Achievement, Curriculum Development and Reform, Special Education, School Lunch, Status of school facilities and the hiring of School Maintenance Workers, Compensation of Teachers and other Educational Personnel and the Status of Federal Funds and Federally-funded contracts.

Present with me today is Ms. Debra Gottlieb, Deputy Commissioner, Mrs. Dionne Wells-Hendrington, Insular Superintendent of the St. Thomas/St. John School District, Mr. Vaughn Hewitt, Acting Insular Superintendent of the St. Croix School District, Ms. Nicole Jacobs, Director of Human Resources and Labor Relations and Mr. Joseph Sibilly, Territorial Facilities Manager.

School Environment and Safety on School Campuses

The St. Thomas-St. John (STT/J) and St. Croix District (STX) Schools are in compliance with the Department of Education's Policies and take proactive measures to protect the safety and security of all our students and staff members.

Currently the STT/J district has a total of 35 monitors to service 14 schools and 3 activity sites. The STX district has 61 monitors that service 16 schools. Both districts also have plans to implement anti-bullying/cyber bullying initiatives, conflict resolution, gang awareness and peer mediation. The goal is to create an atmosphere that fosters open communication and develops a process for staff, students and parents to report bullying and potential threats.

There are procedural policies that exist in our schools. All visitors must sign in at the office and communicate where they are going and for what reason. Visitors receive a pass or identification badge to let the monitors and staff know that they have checked in. Areas where students congregate while waiting for the buses have adequate safety coverage. Facility entry points are also clearly marked. Several of our schools are in the planning phase of repairing and replacing fences. On the St. Thomas/St. John district, Charlotte Amalie High School and Ivanna Eudora Kean High School, which are utilized as community centers, pose potential threats to the safety policies currently in place.

The districts are also exploring alternative communication methods, such as electronic message boards or installation of speakers outside of the buildings to ensure that in the event of an emergency, communication between the main offices and classrooms can occur without interruption. To make this a reality additional funding would be required.

All schools have updated their Crisis Management Plans to include evacuation and re-entry procedures. The Crisis Management Plans include the procedures used by school

personnel and students in the event that there is a fire, tsunami, earthquake, lockdown, bomb threat or shooter on-campus incidents. Our schools all have Crisis Management Teams. Those individuals are responsible for ensuring that the Crisis Management plans are fully executed.

Both districts have been in communication with the Virgin Islands Police Department to assist with developing a series of professional development trainings for all School Monitors. Trainings are slated to begin this summer, 2016. Training will include certification in baton and hand cuff procedures, de-escalating situations, self-defense, CPR and AED training, basic tactics; (hard hand and soft hand) sensitivity and active shooter trainings.

In our efforts to be proactive, the territory has also embarked on the rejuvenation or revitalization of Positive Behavior Intervention Services. This month the STTJ District will begin by training teams assigned from each school to take the lead on the initiatives that build character and confidence in our students and staff. The STX District is entering its second year with PBIS with much success.

Standardized Testing and Student Achievement

Common Core College and Career Readiness Assessments

This past spring, 8,859 students enrolled in grades 3-11 participated in the Smarter Balanced online summative assessments. Smarter Balanced Assessments evaluate student progress on the Virgin Islands' standards in mathematics and English language arts/literacy—more specifically referred to as College and Career Readiness Standards. Additionally, 78 students participated in the National Center and State Collaborative (NCSC) Alternate Assessment aligned to alternate Common Core College and Career Standards. The spring 2015 scores established a new baseline aligned with the College

and Career Readiness Standards and should not be compared to test scores previously reported in the Virgin Islands, namely VITAL-S and VITAL-A test scores. As with any change, there will be a period of adjustment, as teachers and students become familiar with the new standards and tests.

On the Common Core College and Career Readiness Standards aligned tests, territory-wide results for students tested in grades 3-8 and 11 showed 17 percent of students met or exceeded the English language arts standards and 7 percent met or exceeded the mathematics standards. A change in the percent of students who met standards does not mean schools are performing worse or that students are learning less. Instead, this is a reflection of the higher standards the Virgin Islands have adopted to ensure students achieve 21st century college and career readiness.

Virgin Islands first-year assessment results tell us the following:

- The Virgin Islands adopted the College and Career Readiness Standards in 2010, but began full implementation during the 2013-14 school year. At the time of testing, students and teachers had been navigating the rigor of the standards for only two years. We expect students' confidence to be reflected on the assessments as they become more familiar with the rigor of the standards in the ensuing years.
- Students who have scored at the near standard level have great potential of meeting standards as they and their teachers become more familiar with the rigor of the new way of learning and excelling.
- Technological setbacks experienced at the school level during testing played some role in student performance. The Department continues to upgrade its technology to ensure students can more effortlessly navigate the online tests.

While no single test can give a complete picture of achievement, summative assessments provide important information about student progress and areas for improvement. The VIDE is taking the following steps to improve student achievement:

- * Smarter Balanced is more than an end-of-year assessment. The balanced assessment system also includes interim assessments and instructional resources for educators. During the 2015-16 school year, teachers and school administrators will continue to utilize the Smarter Balanced interim assessments which are designed to improve and promote teaching and learning by providing information that can be used to monitor student progress toward mastery of the College and Career Readiness Standards. These interim assessments are available to all third through twelfth (3–12) grade teachers in English language arts and mathematics.

- * Monthly student early-release days allow teachers to come together for dedicated time to plan lessons that are aligned to the College and Career Readiness Standards.

- * Educators have ongoing support from each district's Professional Development Program Manager and Content Coordinators whose roles are to assist teachers with understanding the College and Career Standards and implementing instructional strategies aligned to them.

- * Teachers and administrators have access to a variety of online resources, which consist of tools and practices designed to help them with the implementation of the College and Career Standards.

- * The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) provides ongoing technical support for state and district administrators.

School and District Accountability System

The Every Students Succeeds Act (ESSA) signed into law on December 10, 2015 repeals Adequate Yearly Progress and replaces it with a state developed accountability system that must include certain federally required components. The four main components that every state must include in the new accountability system are as follows:

- States are still required to test students in reading and math in grades 3 through 8 and once in high school. However, states are encouraged to examine their testing requirements and eliminate any unnecessary local tests.
- States will set their own academic goals and measure their progress towards it. In the past, federal law sets a goal that 100% of students would be proficient in reading and math by 2014. Schools were judged based on their progress toward this goal. Now, states can set their own goals for proficiency and measure schools' progress each year.
- States can choose how they will evaluate schools, but they must use six specific indicators in this process: (1) student proficiency on annual tests; (2) student growth; (3) graduation rate; (4) English language acquisition; (5) a fifth indicator of the state's choice relating to school quality or student success; (6) 95% participation rate.
- States and districts will determine which schools are failing and then create a plan to improve them. Schools that must be identified include schools: (1) that are the lowest-performing 5% in the state; (2) where less than 2/3 of students graduate on time; or (3) where certain groups of students (i.e. students with disabilities) are consistently underperforming.

The VIDE began the process of revising the accountability system in April 2014 and will continue this work through the 2016-17 school year. The accountability system designed under ESSA will be implemented in school year 2017-18.

Virgin Islands Department of Education
2014-2015 Assessment Proficiency Rate
 Smarter Balanced and the National Center and State Collaborative Assessment
 English Language Arts/Literacy
 Territory

Grades	Percent of Students tested who scored in each performance level					Percentage of students tested who scored
	Students Tested	Below Standard	Near Standard	Met Standard	Exceeded Standard	Met and Exceeded Standard
Grade 3	1064	65.0%	22.3%	9.2%	3.5%	12.7%
Grade 4	1042	70.5%	17.2%	8.8%	3.5%	12.3%
Grade 5	1072	65.6%	18.6%	12.3%	3.5%	15.9%
Grade 6	1020	51.8%	30.3%	15.4%	2.5%	17.9%
Grade 7	1108	64.9%	20.5%	12.8%	1.8%	14.6%
Grade 8	1029	52.1%	29.8%	16.1%	1.9%	18.1%
Grade 11	818	41.0%	29.0%	23.5%	6.6%	30.1%

Virgin Islands Department of Education
2014-2015 Assessment Proficiency Rate
 Smarter Balanced and the National Center and State Collaborative Assessment
 Mathematics
 Territory

Grades	Percent of Students tested who scored in each performance level					Percentage of students tested who scored
	Students Tested	Below Standard	Near Standard	Met Standard	Exceeded Standard	Met and Exceeded Standard
Grade 3	1067	69.7%	21.3%	8.1%	0.9%	9.0%
Grade 4	1063	69.7%	24.7%	5.2%	0.4%	5.6%
Grade 5	1080	80.1%	15.9%	2.5%	1.5%	4.0%
Grade 6	1028	73.5%	19.6%	5.7%	1.1%	6.8%
Grade 7	1114	75.8%	18.9%	4.6%	0.7%	5.3%
Grade 8	1033	75.4%	18.3%	4.7%	1.5%	6.3%
Grade 11	824	74.0%	15.7%	8.0%	2.3%	10.3%

Curriculum Development and Reform

As aforementioned, in 2010, the Virgin Island Department of Education adopted the College and Career Standards. Full implementation of these standard occurred during school year 2013-2014. Since that time our schools have had a variety of professional development to include job-embedded in order to provide our teachers with the hands-on support that they desperately need. As we continue to provide the much needed support, we have observed one critical point: Although we know what we expect of our students (standards), we have yet to provide our teachers with the roadmap to those expectations (a formal curriculum). Thus, we are embarking on an ambitious and challenging mission of curriculum reform for the territory that is aligned to the College and Career Standards.

Presently, through the State Office of Curriculum & Instruction and district personnel, we are creating the committees necessary to begin this arduous process. Dr. Lauren Larsen, given his vast knowledge and expertise in curriculum design, will chair this committee while FLICC (Florida and the Islands Comprehensive Center) will provide us with consultation as needed. This territorial venture will allow all our students the opportunity to receive a top-notch education and provide our teachers with the guidance, interventions, strategies, and resources necessary to make this possible.

It must be noted that we do have some components already completed, such as the Curriculum Frameworks and Rigorous Curriculum Design; however, these areas will be modified as we travel through this process. The estimated time for the development of our VI Curriculum is approximately 2 years. By mid-February, we shall have the budget breakdown and the list of individuals who will be part of this process. We are excited to begin because we are confident that this investment will chart the course for excellent

and rigorous instruction to occur on a wider scale, which will ultimately improve student achievement significantly.

Special Education

State Office

The State Office of Special Education (“SOSE”) has engaged in several initiatives to improve outcomes for students with disabilities. The overall goal of this agency is to ensure that students with disabilities are equally supported in all environments and that their needs are met through systematic and coherent improvement strategies. SOSE recognizes that valid and reliable support takes place when teachers and other individuals are fully prepared and equipped to work with all students. The importance of continuous professional development that utilizes research-based practices and strategies are needed so that they are directly hands on and can be implemented upon the conclusion of trainings.

In FY 2015 SOSE conducted several trainings in order to empower all students and teachers for success. SOSE engaged teachers and other educational professionals in Differentiated Instruction (DI), Response to Intervention (RTI) and Positive Behavioral Intervention Support (PBIS) throughout this quarter and provided targeted technical assistance to both school districts in regards to specific Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA)/Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) Indicators.

Most recently, SOSE held a 3-day training for school administrators on special education law covering areas of immediate concerns in our schools. This presentation was done by Special Education Attorney Jim Gerl.

Beginning January 2016 PBIS and RTI has switched districts. PBIS is in the STTJ District preparing for a Roll Out activity for all elementary and junior high and middle schools. RTI is in the STX District engaging all elementary and junior high schools.

SOSE conducted two (2) major monitoring activities; results focused and compliance. The results focused monitoring was conducted in the St. Thomas/St. John District. It focused on reading achievement on all grade levels. This focused approach used standardized testing data to identify schools in need of targeted support. Through interviews, on-site file reviews, and parent forums conducted by SOSE's professional team, the team was able to gather information necessary to assess professional development needs of the territory's schools. SOSE also conducted compliance monitoring through desk audits and on-site file reviews. Each monitoring activity yielded a report that identified the compliance and non-compliance areas in each district. This will allow for SOSE to provide technical assistance to both districts on a continuous basis as well as leverage current improvement plans being utilized in both general and special education environments.

SOSE is in the process of preparing the FFY 2014 SPP/APR report for submittal to the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP).

Special Education-STX District

St. Croix District Special Education engaged in several initiatives this school year. The purposes of these initiatives, which focused on the same theme, "Energize Your Performance: Strategies for Success" was to enhance and extend the instructional knowledge and skills of special educators by exposing them to innovative approaches for working with students with disabilities. Additionally, a Parent Empowerment Workshop was conducted to promote, empower and support parents of children with disabilities to become knowledgeable and engaged advocates for their children. The purpose of this training was to assist parents in understanding the basic procedures of the special education system, to help build home-school relationships that are collaborative and mutually respectful, and to provide tools to assist parents in actively engaging in their children's education. More importantly, the workshop provided a forum in which parents' questions and concerns were addressed. STX SPED also

provided training opportunities on all facets of special education to educational staff in VIDE.

Special Education-STTJ District

- Added school psychologists to assessment staff
- Introduced and is implementing behavioral intervention through on-staff behavioral specialists
- Held parent empowerment workshop in the Fall which included community organizations such as Disability Rights, Vocational Rehabilitation, Family Resource Center, etc.
- Built new independent skills classroom at Addelita Cancryn
- Is developing student work programs to enhance career skills for low academic students
- And is currently working with UVI to offer Special Education as a major to address the critical shortage of professionals in this area.

School Lunch

The Virgin Islands School Food Authority is in crisis for FY 2016. We are now in the second quarter of the fiscal year, and the St. Thomas/St. John District has depleted eighty six percent (86%) of their budget, and the St. Croix District has depleted sixty one percent (61%) of their budget. By mid-February they will have depleted the commodity on hand, and will not have the necessary funds to purchase more food.

Over the past three years the U.S. Department of Agriculture has implemented changes and new regulations to the School Lunch Program. The program's main source of funds comes from student participation and SDA entitlement. The School Authority receives reimbursement for each child that receives breakfast, lunch and/or snacks. There has also been a drastic reduction in participation due to "Nutritionally Balanced" initiatives that were implemented in 2012, causing the program to make less money on meals served.

For Breakfast there must be a minimum of four items. Each child must have three (3) options; one of which must be a fruit. For lunch each child has a choice of five (5) items and one must be either a fruit or vegetable. For a snack there must be at least two items. Although milk is optional, it must be made available. In any given week five (5) different vegetables must be served. Substitutions are no longer allowed in the vegetable sub-groups and fruits can no longer be used to replace a shortage in vegetables. If all components are not available in the correct proportions, the meal will not be reimbursed.

The entitlement funds have also been reduced over the years which have resulted in fewer commodity items to subsidize what will be purchased. For example, no vegetables were received under the entitlement for Fiscal Year 2016. However, the portion sizes of the vegetables served to each child has increased in the last year, increasing the quantity to be purchased.

We have seen a drastic increase in the prices for commodities. For the most frequently purchased items there has been a twenty seven percent (27%) increase. Milk which is a federally mandated component of the meal program has increased from sixteen percent (16%) to twenty six percent (26%) depending on the flavors purchased. Indirect costs have also increased exponentially from FY 2014 to FY 2016.

There are stringent federal guidelines that must be followed in order to continue to receive funding from USDA. In order for the School Food Authority to continue to provide this service they will need funds to operate for the remainder of the school year. The St. Thomas/St. John SFA is requesting an additional \$2,462,000.00. The St. Croix SFA is requesting \$2,194,974.00.

Status of School Facilities and the hiring of School Maintenance Workers

This month, VIDE has just completed the managerial restructuring of both the STTJ and STX Maintenance Divisions. Within each District, highly trained individuals

are now are positioned as Directors and Assistant Directors who collectively provide the necessary high energy action needed for both the daily supervision of our Maintenance Teams and their supervisors. This reorganization allows for tremendous amount of administrative work to be handled more effectively and efficiently.

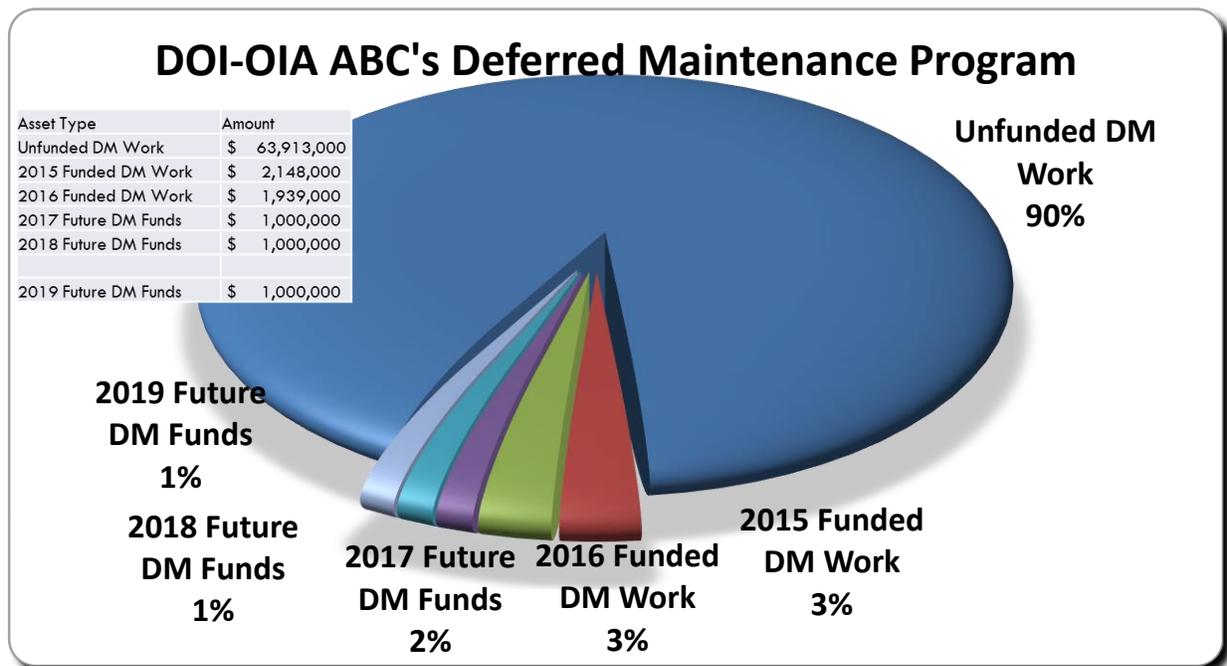
All future facility improvement processes, from daily emergencies and repairs to major specialized improvements, will now be driven via software computerized approaches, through the development of future Policies and Procedures by the Territorial Facilities Manager, and implementation of newly established procurement processes by VIDE's Division of Procurement. This new paradigm will result in faster response times for emergency issues and will establish daily 'boots-on-the-ground' expertise of seasoned professionals with many years of service working as one territorial team and not two separated district and state teams.

Nevertheless, facilities' maintenance of our schools continue to be a major hurdle due to the very limited funds available each fiscal year, compared to the amount of routine maintenance necessary to preserve our schools' infrastructure and environment.

On the positive side, in December 2015 VIDE commenced tackling the backlog of existing Deferred Maintenance territorial issues through the ABCs Program – Phase III with the assistance of the Department of Interior – Office of Insular Affairs allocation of 2.148 million dollars. Upon VIDE securing our signature approved Operating Agreement with the Army Corps of Engineers' representative HHF, Licensed Architect Brian Turnbull was recently hired by HHF and has now become a collaborative and functional member of VIDE's Division of Architectural Engineering Team. Moreover, as a Team we have also secured NEPA Approvals from the Army Corps of Engineers for all non-historical school facilities territorially and, thereafter, received our Authorization to Proceed (ATP) for said projects.

Due to these efforts, professional Scopes of Work were expeditiously developed for structural life safety issues and four (4) engineering projects (2 in the STX District and 2 in the STTJ District) were placed out to bid in December and now await bid opening and the final interoffice procurement process and award to commence these Engineering work efforts.

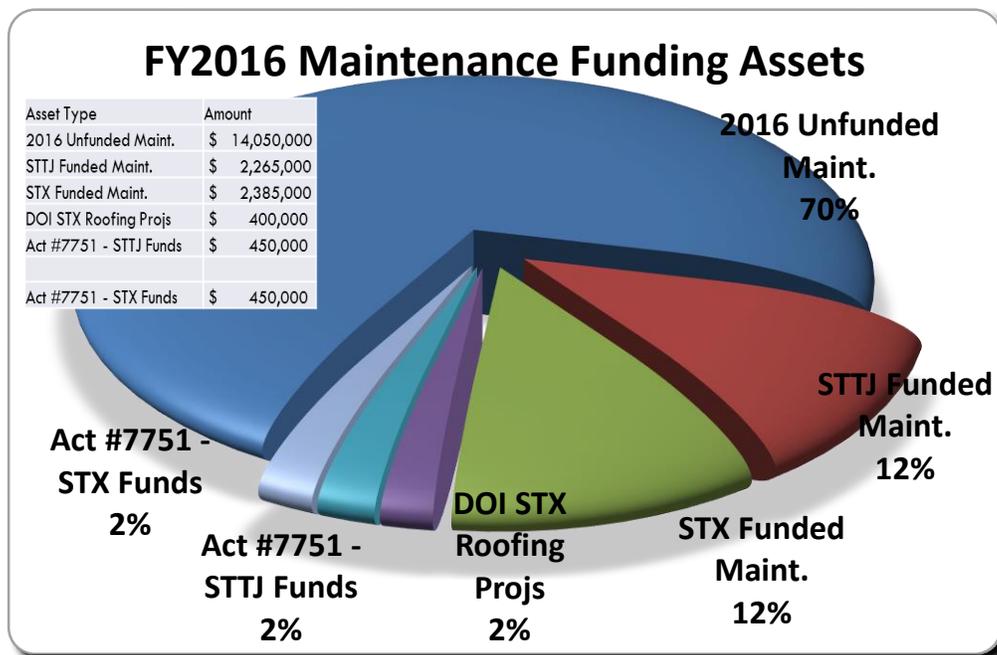
Be that as it may, as delineated within the following chart 90% of all Deferred Maintenance work efforts remain unfunded as of today's date. And, due to our instituted approach of drastically underfunding the overall maintenance needs year after year for 2.5 million square feet of schools, said 90% will, without doubt, continue to climb and will not cease until funding is properly established to meet maintenance objectives territorially.



The Education Department physical plant encompasses thirty-two (32) schools and nineteen (19) activity centers within both Districts that equates to approximately 2.5 million square feet of interior covered space. The daily maintenance upkeep for this

amount of space requires minimally an allocation of over twenty (20) million dollars yearly, as was determined by the Army Corps of Engineers in 2013 under the ABCs Program – Phase II. Deferred maintenance of our schools, most of which are now over forty (40) years old has created emergency situations requiring immediate attention.

Our Emergency Department, also known as VIDE’s Maintenance Program, continues to function within the very limited available funding allocated annually as detailed within the following chart for FY2016:



Compensation of Teachers and other Educational Personnel

The Department of Education is severely challenged as it pertains to the recruitment and retention of personnel primarily because of our inability to compete with other school districts nationally. Starting salaries for qualified teachers and other departmental support personnel are considerably below the national averages while the cost of living in the Virgin Islands is among the highest levels in the nation. Accordingly, the Department’s efforts to recruit teachers and other personnel needed to educate the

territory's children and to maintain the department's facilities are often met with frustration when eligible applicants become aware of the salaries offered, lack of relocation incentives and the cost of living in the Territory. These three things have become a lethal combination to the Department's recruitment and retention efforts.

Despite our challenges, the Department of Education has been able to utilize a combination of creative recruitment techniques and efforts to ensure that there are teachers in our classrooms providing a quality education to our students. To date, despite some bureaucratic challenges, all new teachers and other employees hired since the beginning of the 2015-2016- School Year have been paid and the department continues to work diligently to compensate all new employees in a timely manner. However, additional funding of \$3.5 million is urgently needed to ensure that the department is able to fill all of its critical vacant positions such as teachers, nurses, and other highly skilled professionals needed to educate our students and maintain the department's rapidly aging facilities.

Status of Federal Funds and Federal-funded contracts

Although the Fiscal Year 2014 and 2015 Title V Consolidated Grant applications were submitted timely, to date the Virgin Islands Department of Education has only received approval to draw down partial awards of the Fiscal Year 2014 and Fiscal Year 2015 Title V Consolidated Title V grants for the following federal grant programs: 21st Century Community Learning Centers and State Assessments. The Department was also able to drawdown Fiscal Years 2014 and 2015 IDEA Special Education federal grant funds.

The Department of Education is currently awaiting the approval to drawdown Fiscal Year 2014 Consolidated Title V Carryover funds of \$18,439,759.00 and Fiscal Year 2015 Consolidated Title V funds of \$17,183,549.00. However, since the Department of Education has not yet secured the approval of the U.S Department of Education to

drawdown the remainder of the Fiscal Years 2014 and 2015 Title V Consolidated grants, those funds are not available to supplement locally funded educational initiatives as planned. Additionally, because of the late awarding of the Fiscal Year 2014 and 2015 Title V Consolidated grant funds the Virgin Islands Department of Education will not have the normal two year window of opportunity to expend those funds. Thus, most of the federally funded contracts are on hold pending the approval of the awarding of the Fiscal Year 2014 and 2015 Title V Consolidated grant funds.

The Virgin Islands Department of Education was notified by the U.S. Department of Education on January 5, 2016 that the Department needed to submit additional information and clarifications to support the Fiscal Year 2015 Title V Consolidated grant application. The U.S. Department of Education also advised the Department on January 7, 2016 that the approval of the remainder of the Department's Fiscal Year 2014 Title V Consolidated carryover federal grant application was contingent upon the approval of the Department's Fiscal Year Title V 2015 Consolidated grant application. Unfortunately, during the past months the Department has received inconsistent technical assistance/guidance from the U.S. Department of Education with respect to the Fiscal Year 2014 and 2015 Title V Consolidated grant applications specifically with respect to format and content of the applications.

The inconsistent and untimely technical assistance/guidance from the U.S. Department of Education has unfortunately contributed significantly to delay of the approval of the remainder of the Fiscal Year 2014 and the Fiscal Year 2015 Title V Consolidated grant applications. Additionally, the inconsistent guidance from BCA together with changes in the local procurement rules and regulations has also contributed to the delayed processing and administering of many of the federally funded contracts.

In conclusion, Funding restraints pose the greatest challenge in obtaining the necessary resources. The planning process requires us to plan for effective use of available community resources. Some emergencies cannot be prevented. Nonetheless, the Department of Education continues to ensure that that our schools and activity sites provide the best educational experiences possible.

There is no question that there is work to be done, and the support required needs to be addressed as we move forward with this initiative.

This concludes the Department of Education's testimony to the Committee on Education and Workforce Development and we are ready to respond to any of your questions at this time.