

**TESTIMONY OF ROSA SOTO-THOMAS, PRESIDENT
ST.CROIX FEDERATION OF TEACHERS, AFT LOCAL 1826**



PRESENTED TO:

**COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND WORKFORCE
DEVELOPMENT**

31st LEGISLATURE OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

EARLE B. OTTLEY LEGISLATIVE HALL

Wednesday, June 1, 2016

ST. THOMAS, U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS

10:00 A.M.

Good morning the Honorable Senator Jean A. Forde, Chairman of the Committee on Education and Workforce Development, Members of the Education and Workforce Development Committee, other distinguished members of the 31th Legislature, ladies and gentlemen in the Legislative Chambers, the media, and the viewing and listening audience. My name is Rosa Soto-Thomas, President of the St. Croix Federation of Teachers, AFT- Local 1826 a union representing approximately 800 Educational Professionals, Paraprofessionals and Support Staff. I thank you for the opportunity to update this committee from the prospective of members regarding their concerns and the status of our Negotiations.

On behalf of the Executive Board, Representative Council and the entire membership of the St. Croix Federation of Teachers, AFT-Local 1826 I present the following testimony.

First I would like thank the Mapp/Potter Administration for sending Bill No. 31-0320 to the 31st Legislature for its' ultimate vetting by this body on April 22, 2016 and the subsequent approval and signature by the Honorable Governor Kenneth E. Mapp executed on May 3, 2016. This measure, now ACT NO. 7873 amended the 2016 General Fund and amongst other items it appropriated 5.5 Million Dollars to implement the AFT long overdue step increase. I would also like to thank the Commissioner of Education, Sharon A. McCullum for agreeing to allow all currently certified Teachers to receive their step increases. Members began receiving their step increases for 2010-2011 last Thursday and expressed their gratitude to the union. It is my understanding that NOPAs and retro back to January 1, 2016 are being processed. We are currently waiting for all other eligible AFT members to receive their step increases along with the other component.

The AFT would also like to thank the Honorable Senate President, Neville James and other members of the 31st Legislation for appropriating \$140,000 to pay stipends to paraprofessionals who were on leave from their positions at the Department of Education to fulfill their student teaching requirements at the University of the Virgin Islands. They are still anxiously awaiting the processing of their compensation. Their families have also suffered alongside them.

Status of Collective Bargaining Agreement

Our contract with the Virgin Islands Government expired on August 1, 2015. Consequently, we have been operating on a day to day contract extension. We are currently slated to get back to the bargaining table this summer in July to begin to address the following:

- ✓ Retroactivity which continues to mount from September 1, 2010 - December 31, 2015 which is a component of the 2007-2011 Collective Bargaining Agreement.
- ✓ 2011-2015 Wage Re-Opener & a Successor Agreement

Working Conditions:

Our members continue to be very concerned about the adverse conditions of our aging schools and lack of maintenance. Daily, the maintenance division is called upon to assist in some way at our schools and facilities and in many instances problems are rectified. This of course does not address the large ticket items or capital improvement projects which are badly needed.

As prescribed in our Collective Bargaining Agreement and when violations of AFT Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) occur, we try to resolve these issues informally and eventually set forth our concerns through the grievance procedure if they are not properly resolved. Over the course of time, members have contracted various respiratory ailments and exhibit symptoms which are the result of chronic exposure to mold. It is unconscionable when members are coerced into working in deplorable conditions which will negatively impact their health and safety. OSHA has cited several schools for violations and while some issues are abated others are not.

Some classes are moved around daily because teachers rightfully refuse to teach in rooms that leak and are inundated with a musty, moldy smells. It is our hope that there is a well sorted out summer maintenance plan to address the avalanche of working condition issues which are plaguing our public schools and activity centers. The St. Croix Educational Complex, a school which recently celebrated its 20th birthday is not immune to working condition issues. It is mold infested, window operators are

inoperable, ceiling tiles are missing, rooms leak, and water protrudes from the floor. The counselors' suite still leaks and on any given day it is difficult to locate staff whose class assignment changes daily on account of these issues.

For the past three years the Alexander Henderson School has had to close for some reason or the other. Closures for the most part have been linked to the leaky roof which attributes to the musty and moldy smells that members report. Fiberglass also gets dislodged and students and staff experience symptoms of rashes, welts and respiratory problems. Although the DOE has intervened in the past, it is evident that Henderson needs a lot more.

Last week, on May 26 and 27, St. Croix Central High School had to be closed on account of equipment failure.

Most recently, last Friday, the Juanita Gardine Elementary School had an early dismissal due to electrical problems at that site. Although designated a historical site, the Lew Muckle Elementary School is also in a deplorable state. It is rodent and vermin infested and is in disrepair. Bathrooms also need to be overhauled. There must be a way to install an AC in the Library. When it rains, it pours. Waters makes its way through windows and doors in too many classrooms. Windows and wooden railings must be replaced.

The Pearl B. Larsen Elementary School on the east end is leaking consistently. That roof needs to be worked on.

St. Croix Career and Technical Center is also faced with a slew of maintenance issues. Doors have rusted and are off the hinge. There is mold in various classrooms. Ceiling tiles are missing and need to be replaced. Classrooms and the media center have been without AC for over a year. The generator at C-Tech is situated near classrooms which have to be relocated once the power goes off.

Our students continue to lose instructional time on account of our failing infrastructure.

A plan must be employed to readily maintain our schools during the summer even if it means interrupting summer school. In the past, summer maintenance occurred on a regular basis. There is an unyielding need

to reinstitute this program. AC filters need to be cleaned, buildings need to be thoroughly cleaned and sanitized, freshly painted and exterminated. Leaky roofs need to be repaired. Unquestionably, funding is needed to maintain and rebuild our schools yet the Department of Education budget continues to be reduced. The minuscule appropriation for maintenance must be increased.

After a year of Elena Christian School being shuttered, we are pleased to hear that this administration is plans to move forward with repairing that facility. Our students and staff have had to experience too much gun fire and trauma in that location. The students also need access to their gymnasium.

Excessive Temperatures

The bottom line is our schools and activity centers need to be retrofitted to meet the challenges of climate change. As we head to summer, we have been experiencing excessively high temperatures again. This prevailing issue has to be addressed. Thermometers reading at the beginning of the school year and most recently reveal agonizing elevated temperatures which we are experiencing again. There moments when both students and educators are not able to function in the sweltering heat. Fans are not the resolve.

Consolidated Schools:

I am happy to report that embers at the Alfredo Andrews School are getting along well but contend that they are too many bodies in one school. Special subject teachers are overwhelmed by the number of students they have to teach with no assigned classrooms.

Claude O. Markoe and Eulalie Rivera Schools were consolidated with students and staff from the Evelyn M. Williams Elementary Schools. Some classes which were reopened after being shut down for quite some time have working conditions issues that need to be addressed. The construction of class list really presented a challenge for teachers this year.

Reauthorization of ESSA: Student Success Act:

No Child Left Behind: The 2002 law did not address the Common Core standards specifically, since they didn't emerge until later that decade. And they emerged not from the federal government, but from a state-led effort to define what the states should be teaching and how it should be taught. But the Obama administration did play a role in expanding Common Core through waivers to No Child Left Behind requirements that encouraged states to adopt the standards.

Every Student Succeeds Act: The new law allows states to adopt Common Core but does not require it. In fact, it requires the Education Department to remain neutral: "The Secretary shall not attempt to influence, incentivize, or coerce State adoption of the Common Core State Standards developed under the Common Core State Standards Initiative or any other academic standards common to a significant number of States, or assessments tied to such standard."

No Child Left Behind: One of the fundamental principles of the 2002 law — indeed, the principle that gave the law its name — was that schools had to improve the performance of all students. To do that, it required school districts to break out test scores and other measures for minority subgroups to make sure they were making progress each year. In practice, many states found that goal to be unrealistic and got around them by either creating "super subgroups" that lumped all disadvantaged students together, or changing to more subjective measures like parent/teacher involvement.

Every Student Succeeds Act: The new law leaves accountability goals almost entirely up to the states. States must submit their accountability plans to the Department of Education, which still has a limited oversight role. And there are "guardrails" defining broadly what the accountability goals need to include, and test scores and graduation rates must be given "much greater weight" than the more subjective measures.

Let me make it abundantly clear that the testing giants on Wall Street and their allies have imposed a lot of programs which the research does not support. AFT say the system is rigged in favor of money moguls who want to destroy public education locally and across the nation. We will continue to stand-up and fight forward.

Update on the New Teacher Evaluation System

After an actual year of full blown piloting of the Teacher Evaluation System, members contend that it entails a lot of work and that it continues to negatively impact instructional time.

It will not count this year because the DOE is awaiting analysis of the data from observations which are currently taking place. It was disclosed to the union yesterday that the evaluation for this year 2015-2016 would be utilized as a guide to furnish direction for members. The results of this evaluation is specifically

as the department puts it, to be used as a frame of reference. There is frankly three weeks of school left and no cut scores have been established rendering the evaluation unusable at least for this school year. To do otherwise will violate the AFT CBA. Additionally, the Department along with FLICC are just beginning to work on determining V.I. cut scores which will be ready for adoption next school year 2016-2017. The new tool will most likely count then.

Many members have reported that it is a challenge to comply with all the requirements of Charlotte Danielson when they do not own or readily have access to a computer on site. A computer shortage exists. They ask the question: Why make demands on staff when we fail to provide them with the proper tools and supports? This is not going to working in these instances.

In some instances, members have shared that their principals or assistant principals are still not well versed with the New Teacher evaluation system and this provides a major setback.

The Teacher Professional Growth Plan (TPGP) and the portfolio still remain major components that are most resisted by teachers. If the amount of goals can be reduced, it would be more palatable for our teachers. Teachers who have attained a “Distinguished” rating for at least two consecutive years should not have to go through the entire evaluation each year. Teacher Professional Growth Plans (TPGP) should be in place at least two years in an effort to reasonably measure and observe growth outcomes. While other evaluations are being tweaked it appears that the teachers’ is set in stone.

Teachers choose the teaching profession because of their love of children and their desire to help them grow and blossom. Across the nation, however, far too many educators are leaving the classroom. Headlines report teacher shortage in every state. In conversing with teachers locally, they contend that their autonomy in their profession has vanished. The very teacher directed collaboration is now spearheaded by administrators. Teachers no longer guide the sessions. This is very discouraging.

Equipment and Supplies

Considering the vast demand for technology in the classrooms as instructional tools, there are too many Teachers who do not have computers assigned to them. This needs to be addressed. Additionally, Access

to basic supplies, paper, text books, copiers and other resources remain a major issue in most of our schools. I have heard many of you disclosed that you too have had to assist with the copying of Exams or worksheets for teachers. This situation has not gotten any better. Supplies are sparse in our schools. Teachers' statuses on Facebook include pleads for items needed to effectively run their classes and educate our children. It is great to have community partners and donations from time to time, however; some items need to be furnished or secured by the DOE.

Internet Connectivity

Technology has a critical role to play in the pursuit of excellence in grades K-12 schools, but technology-rich classrooms are not possible unless high-speed broadband gets there first. Students and teachers need access to fast, reliable Internet to prepare our students to compete in today's world.

There is clearly a need to pave the way for non-stop digital learning in every classroom. Too many educators have expressed frustration with the challenges they encounter as they try to navigate the internet in their classrooms.

It is evident that our current infrastructure cannot sustain the demands of educators or the students we serve. From the instant of entry into a facility on a daily basis, the demand for the internet begins with the biometric clock punch –into the recording of attendance in power school, logging into go-plans, accessing instructional tools throughout the day. Accessibility to the Evaluation Platform and administering of the District Standardized test is also an issue. This is most challenging and we have got to do better. The Department of Education must also not penalize our members when the current system falls short and is down and inaccessible for great lengths of time. Timelines must then be shifted if need be. Fair is fair. As a solution or back up plan, free internet service should be offered to Educators. It is abundantly clear that the current Internet system has fallen short and continues to interrupt daily plans for our educators and students which we serve. Efforts should be employed to offer more computer check out services to educators.

School Lunch, Payroll & Human Resources

Both district and state school lunch programs have serious working condition issues with their assigned work spaces. Employees are displaced and are frustrated because a new location has been identified but not finalized. Members are packed and ready to relocate to the Racon Bldg. off the Evans Highway but are still not able to do so pending word from Department Officials. More staff is also need in the St. Croix Offices to adequately address the needs of the Department.

Closings

Honorable Senator Forde, once again, I thank you for affording me the opportunity to put the AFT members concerns on the record so that we can begin to address and resolve them. Here ends my testimony. I stand ready to receive any questions this body may have.