

Committee on Education and Workforce Development**Update on the Department of Education's activities, facilities and programs**

Good day Honorable Jean A. Forde, Chairman of the Committee on Education and Workforce Development, all committee and non-committee members, Sister Rosa Soto Thomas, President of the St. Croix Federation of Teachers, Local 1826 and Commissioner of Education, Dr. Sharon McCollum and the education team. A special good day to all the hard working men and women of the AFT Local 1825 and 1826. Good day to all other invited testifiers, the viewing and listening audience.

I am Avery L. Lewis, President of the St. Thomas/St. John Federation of Teachers, Local 1825. Chairman Forde, I would like to thank you for extending an invitation to the AFT to be a part of the discussion, as it pertains to the final review of the 2015-2016 school year, the Department of Education's activities, facilities and programs.

School Environment and Campus Safety

I have made numerous visits to all schools and activity centers in the St. Thomas/St. John District and very few repairs have been completed. The chief complaints are deteriorating infrastructures, excessive heat, rodent and insect infestations, termites, moldy classrooms and centers (with poor air quality), electrical and technological issues. My list of complaints continues with falling ceilings, leaking roofs, poor restroom conditions, non-functional recreational areas, broken windows and damaged floors. I have been in close communications with Insular Superintendent Dionne Wells-Hedrington, Mr. Joseph Sibilly and Mr. McCarty, from the maintenance department, about the deplorable conditions of our schools. Senators, I am not here today to play the blame game, but it is my prayer that after my giving my testimony and this session comes to an end, the Department of Education and our children can get some additional assistance from this body. The Department has crafted a summer maintenance schedule, which is in the range of \$3 million dollars, to fund current maintenance needs

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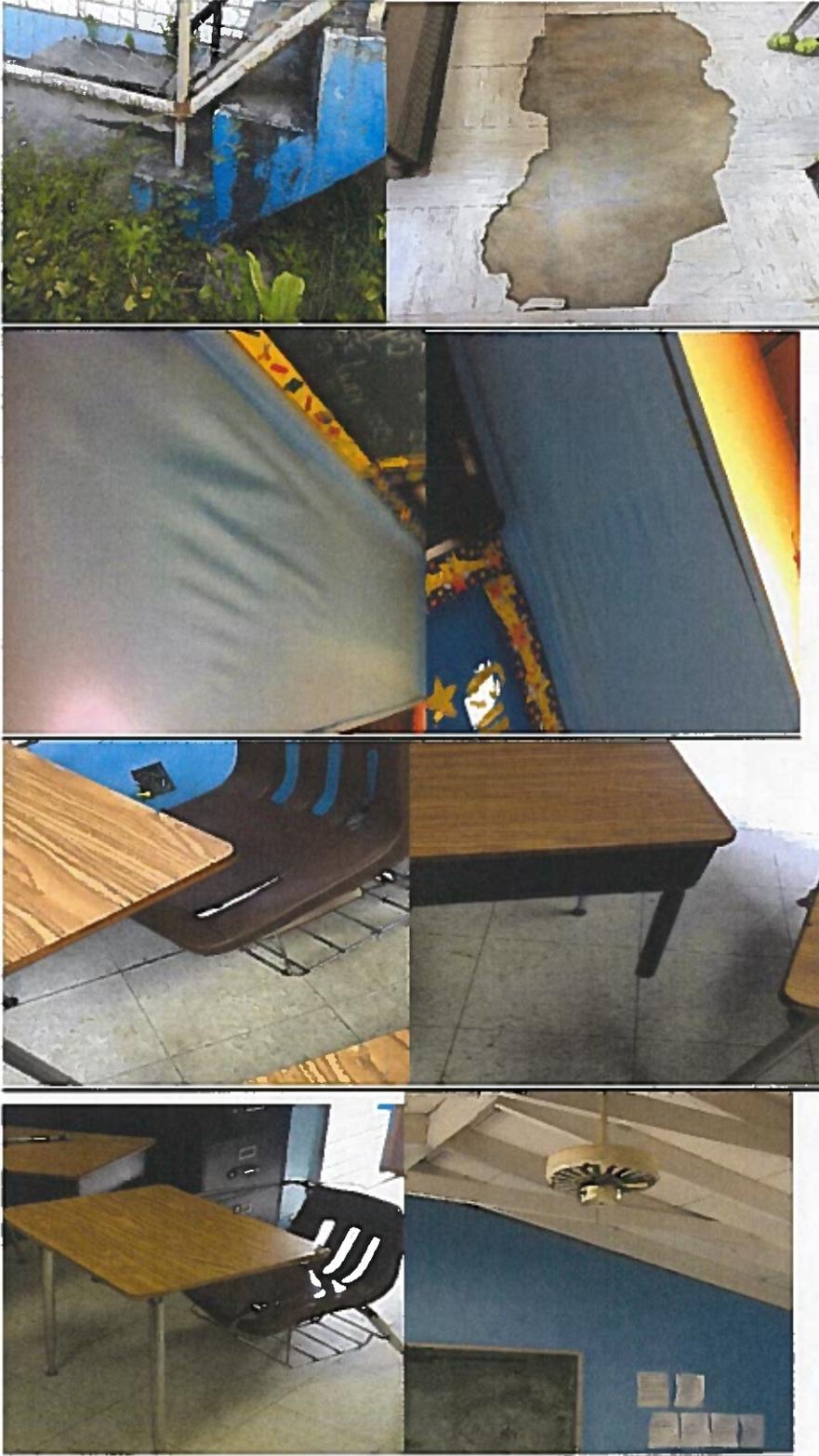
in the St. Thomas/ St. John District. This summer, I am asking that all schools and activity centers are treated for pest and rodent infestations. All schools and activity centers should have air quality testing conducted and the results reported timely, so that the appropriate remediation can be completed properly. On a daily basis, members have reported to me that they are becoming ill, due to poor air quality. Even the DOE's school buses are moldy and are deteriorating. We need new buses, especially for the Special Education unit. I not only speak on behalf of members, but I voice the concerns of parents and students. It is the DOE's position that not all areas of concern could have been included in this summer's maintenance, due to lack of funding. The DOE's summer maintenance task schedule is crafted by a priority structure. Due to the poor electrical infrastructure, some schools cannot accommodate the installation of air conditioning units. There are classrooms that exceed the contractual temperature of 89 degrees, daily. However, there are elected officials currently proposing an extension to the school year, under these unbearable, inhumane conditions. At this time, this line of thinking is simply ludicrous. Senators, in previous testimony I have detailed the plaguing conditions of schools. As it pertains to security and safety, there are many schools without secured perimeter fencing, no fire alarm system, proper lighting, a lack of or nonfunctioning intercom and camera systems. Many of the school's main entrances are unsecured and this places all of us in harm's way. Unfortunately, time does not permit me to detail many more of the issues plaguing our public schools. I have conveyed all of my concerns, verbally and in writing, to the office of the Insular Superintendent. For the record, I would like to publicly acknowledge Mrs. Wells-Hedrington and her team, for addressing some the issues and reported findings to me, including the action plan for remediation. Many of the schools also need classroom furniture, which include teacher and student desks and chairs. Senators, the 2016-2017 school year cannot begin with schools in such deplorable conditions. No one should have to work under these conditions and students should be able to learn in an environment that is safe and conducive for health.

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Compensation/Negotiations for AFT Members

The employee morale in schools and activity centers is at an all-time low. Let us not sugar coat the reality that members are overwhelmed, frustrated and underpaid. These hard working individuals go to work every day and perform, because they have a passion for educating our children and are committed to the DOE. The members have risen to the occasion day in and day out. In some cases, we have educators performing the duties of two or three persons. The Mapp/Potter Administration has promised, through the media, to pay the outstanding 2010-2011 portion of the 2007-2011 Collective Bargaining Agreement, with retroactivity only for active members, dating back to January 1, 2016. Through the work of the 21st Legislature, VIDE Human Resources Division has been working diligently to ensure that the June 9th and June 23rd date of salary implementation and retroactive payment comes to fruition. Senators, I am asking this body to appropriate funding to cover retroactivity from Sept 2010 to December 31, 2015 to make the 2007-2011 Collective Bargaining Agreement complete. The AFT Locals 1825 and 1826 were called to the table, dates set and the ground rules process has begun. Again, I will be seeking assistance from this Legislative body to appropriate funding for the 2011-2015 Collective Bargaining Agreement Wage Opener and for the 2015 successor agreement. Senators, you have heard the frustration and dissatisfaction on numerous occasions, by members of both AFT Locals. If we truly care for our children and the quality of our education, please do the prudent thing and appropriate monies that we can use to attract qualified educators and retain our highly qualified professionals. We, the AFT have one Collective Bargaining Agreement with three units, Professionals, Paraprofessionals and Support staff. These hard working men and women deserve their pay. Many educators have had to resort to supplementing their incomes, by obtaining one or two part-time jobs. At times, this has caused members to be absent from their families and have caused a few marital issues. Senators, we are hoping to be successful at the bargaining table, because we are already seeing the resignations and retirement letters coming in. We still suffer from a shortage of teachers, paraprofessionals and support staff.

Equipment and Supplies

We have a number of promethean boards and computers that are not working. Some need to be replaced with new devices and others only need repair parts. Some of these promethean devices are being destroyed, due to excessive heat and dust.

Textbooks and workbooks are still of concern. On the elementary level, some subject areas continue to lack a full set of resources. Teachers are forced to make photocopies. Additionally, we are still experiencing a shortage of good manuals, textbooks and workbooks.

Subscriptions to most of the online resources have expired. Therefore, students cannot receive necessary additional intervention or credit recovery. In recent news, it was made known that two years of federal funding was recently released, so hopefully this issue will be corrected.

Kitchen staff workers still complain daily about inadequate kitchen equipment, such as the dish washers, stoves, serving trays and the serving line equipment.

With the current outbreak of Dengue Fever, Chikungunya and Zika viruses, I have yet to see any hand soap or sanitizers in any of the dispensers, located in all schools.

New Teacher Evaluation System

This has been a very trying year, as it pertains to the new evaluation system. Members have express their frustration on numerous occasions about this lengthy, time consuming evaluation system. This system, along with all the other implementations and assessments, has taken away from quality instructional time. Again, we need to bring the stakeholders together, including more teachers, to see determine just how we can make this an easier process or just simply get rid of it and create our own.

Closing

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In closing, I want to reiterate that we love our jobs and most of all the children of the Virgin Islands. Senators, let us not just have another "talking" session, but one from which we can truly see measurable results. 1. We need extensive interior and exterior maintenance work 2. We need the balance of the 2010-2011 retroactivity and not to forgo the long outstanding retroactivity, of which 83.3% is still owed 3. We need a starting salary that is comparable with the mainland's starting salary and our ever rising cost of living. Today is not about pointing fingers at each other and casting blame, but each one of us has a role to positively contribute to the lives of the future of the Virgin Islands, so let us leave with solutions. Thank you for your time and consideration. I gladly look forward to further discussion and answering your questions.

