

REFORMING, REBUILDING, AND REBRANDING PUBLIC EDUCATION

Committee on Disaster Recovery, Infrastructure and Planning

Dr. Dionne Wells-Hedrington

Commissioner

June 3, 2024





THE VIRGIN ISLANDS
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



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June 3, 2024

Honorable Senator Milton E. Potter
Chairman of the Disaster Recovery, Infrastructure and Planning
Capitol Building
PO Box 1690
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Sent electronically via senatorpotter@legvi.org

Dear Honorable Senator Milton Potter,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony about the Virgin Islands Department of Education's updates on our disaster projects to the 35th Legislature Senate Committee on Disaster Recovery, Infrastructure and Planning.

This handbook provides testimony and accompanying information. Thank you for your continued support and attention regarding the progress and plans to rebuild a stronger VIDE.

Sincerely,

Dionne Wells-Hedrington, Ed.D.
Commissioner

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STATEMENT BY COMMISSIONER

Good afternoon, Disaster Recovery, Infrastructure and Planning Committee Chair, Senator Milton Potter; Vice-Chair, Diane T. Capehart; committee members Senators Franklin D. Johnson, Alma Francis Heyliger, Kenneth L. Gittens, Marise C. James, and Carla J. Joseph, non-committee members present, and everyone listening and viewing today. I am Dr. Dionne Wells-Hedrington, and I have the honor of serving the students and families of the Virgin Islands as the Commissioner of Education. Thank you for this opportunity to discuss the planned, ongoing, and completed disaster recovery projects and their potential impact on our students, faculty, and staff at the Virgin Islands Department of Education

I want to take a moment to commend you and the committee members for your ongoing collaboration with the department and our shared objectives. This body has shown tremendous support and responsiveness as we strive to enhance public education in the territory. At the VIDE, our initiatives are centered on Reforming, Rebranding, and Rebuilding Public Education in the territory.

Starting in 2017, we embarked on a journey together to rebuild the public education infrastructure in the Territory. I am thrilled to report we have received approximately \$3.4 billion from FEMA. Approximately \$3.3 billion is coming from the FEMA Public Assistance (PA) program for permanent work and \$0.1 billion from the FEMA Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) for Saferooms.

Today, I'm here to address the construction program for the Department of Education which includes new schools and modernization projects across the territory. Education is the cornerstone of our society, shaping the future of our workforce, economy, and civic engagement. As such, it is imperative that we prioritize adequate funding to support our schools, educators, and students.

With me are this morning is Chaneel Callwood, VIDE Architect, and lead on all disaster recovery projects.

Additional VIDE personnel are on standby to provide detailed insights into specific areas if needed. Again, thank you for your unwavering support and the opportunity to testify today.

Over the summer break, our dedicated maintenance team has been working diligently to address potential issues and implement necessary upgrades. We believe it is crucial to maintain a conducive and safe environment for our students' growth and development. The Department has established a petty cash system where Maintenance Directors in both districts can have access to funding, \$50,000, for emergency repairs at our sites. That funding is housed at the Superintendents offices makes it accessible to our maintenance directors and has helped the department in expediting the emergency repairs to VIDE facilities. The division is also in the process of scoping out services to solicit service contracts with local vendors so that in the event we have an immediate need, for example, air quality testing or mold remediation, that awarded contractor could be tasked and respond to the situation immediately to remediate. The establishment of the School Maintenance and Construction Bureau is on the way. The post for the

executive director is in the Division of Personnel, and once that person is interviewed and hired, preparations will begin to transition the unit. Maintenance and Operations personnel have been moved under the bureau as well as the necessary operational budget. The maintenance directors were very elated to see the increase in local funding being given to the division with the establishment of the bureau. Historically maintenance has received \$2,000,000.00 territory wide and that has increased now to \$5,000,000.00 territory wide. In addition, the bureau has received a one-time amount of \$7,500,000.00 and the reprogramming funding from the Public Finance Authority in the amount of \$3,417,978.25.

DISASTER RECOVERY PROJECTS/NEW SCHOOLS

The Virgin Islands Department of Education (VIDE) supports all public schools on the islands, providing resources and leadership for more than 44 instructional and support locations, and nearly 10,000 students territory wide. USVI Public Schools are currently offering powerful educational experiences within their classrooms, but in many cases are challenged to provide the resources and support needed for future-ready learning. In September 2017, two Category 5 hurricanes caused catastrophic damage across the Territory. Now, in 2024, we are rebuilding. We are implementing the [Educational Facility Master Plan](#) to support teaching and learning with equity for all students by building infrastructure to support a future-ready vision for public schools.



Challenges

We've been busy launching a \$3.4 billion capital improvement program and the Office of Disaster Recovery (ODR) has been instrumental in our achieving this unprecedented funding milestone. When the funds were obligated, we were ready with a plan in hand that was developed with the community and approved by Governor Albert Bryan, Jr. We have tightened our belt and reduced our footprint to what we can afford to maintain while building in capacity for growth. We have struck the right balance between quantity and quality and are confident that we can deliver schools that will serve our students now and far into the future. The challenges we have faced, lessons learned, and potential obstacles are shown in the following table along with the next steps to address these challenges and keep us moving.

Item	Issue	Comments
1	Escalation / FEMA funding is fixed - Time is eating away at our budgets. The longer we take to get work under contract, the more things cost.	We are establishing a process for setting aside a reserve to use in ways that maintain the integrity of the master plan and ensure what we build is equitable and of quality.
2	Contracting and Procurement Time – New contract templates and RFPs are required for modern delivery methods.	We are working with the ODR legal team to draft design-build and construction manager at-risk contract templates for inclusion in future RFPs. We are also negotiating change orders, not just accepting them, to reduce the cost on work in progress.
3	Technical support experienced in school building.	We have retained project management firms to assist us in program management and a criteria architect firm to ensure the quality of the buildings are equitable across the campuses even though they are designed by different architects and engineers.
4	Prompt payment.	We are overlapping our workflows and coordinating weekly with the ODR and other agencies to develop the supporting information required to request FEMA approval of each project step timely.
5	Communication.	We are holding quarterly meetings with the New Schools Construction Advisory Board.
6	Campus communication.	We are establishing campus construction teams to meet regularly with the contractors and receive updates.

Funding

We have attained the funding that will allow us to transform our educational system into a forward-facing, 21st-century model. Indeed, I represented the territory as the closing keynote speaker for the 2023 annual conference of the national organization called Association for Learning Environments (A4LE). At this time, our school construction program is among the largest and most comprehensive in the U.S. and was recognized by A4LE's Executive Board in their first-ever Board Award to the USVI:

“The Association for Learning Environments (A4LE) is honored to acknowledge and recognize Governor Byran, and his government, for the courageous work that is being performed in the United States Virgin Islands in addressing disaster-related reconstruction for their public education system, and important infrastructures. When complete, the students and teachers in the classroom will be the beneficiaries of this groundbreaking work. Every day, rural school systems throughout the United States and its territories, which have little to no financial support, face the same monumental challenges in providing school spaces that are safe, secure and technologically equal learning environments. Through the efforts of Governor Bryan, and his government, progress can be made, and in doing so we see this effort as a potential model for others; and one that the citizens of the United States Virgin Island should support.”

The funds will be used to build out the VIDE footprint of the future to ensure all students attend school in equally appointed learning environments. The following chart outlines the funding received by district and the planned, ongoing, and future projects. As shown in the list below, more than half of the projects (12 projects) are being designed, three of the 12 have construction contracts being signed, and two of the 12 are under construction. Projects marked with an asterisk (*) are out for bid in STT Bundle 1.



COMPLETED, ONGOING, AND PLANNED PROJECTS (in alphabetical order)

Completed Projects

Wheatley Discovery Center (Phase 1 complete (CAHS Annex, Phase 2 pending)

Wheatley was modernized and is used jointly by the skills center and the high school. This pilot project demonstrates a few key features such as flexible furniture that meets the needs of students of various sizes and allows students to move, and moveable walls that teachers can open to combine classes.



Ongoing Projects - Construction

Arthur A. Richards PreK-8 at the Evelyn Williams Campus (New Build)

When completed, the school will have a capacity to serve 1,070 students. The project is being delivered through a design-build contract. Design work has progressed to 90%, demolition has been completed and construction is ongoing. The gymnasium is designed to serve as a Saferoom and will be used by the community as a hurricane shelter. The school's projected opening date is August 2026. The school will feature a separate learning community building for students in grades 6-8 on the west side of the campus. The gymnasium is designed to serve as a Saferoom and will be used by the community as a hurricane shelter. Click here to view the [Arthur A. Richards PreK-8 flyover](#).



Arthur A. Richards PreK-8 at the Evelyn Williams Campus (New Build) - Continued



Raphael O. Wheatley Skills Center at the Gladys A. Abraham Campus (Modernization)

The Abraham campus is being modernized and expanded to serve as the new home for the Adult Career and Technical Education programs. The spaces have been designed to be flexible and support a number of programs, including but not limited to a teaching kitchen for the culinary arts, a computer-aided-design (CAD) lab with 3-D printing for students in construction technology, a fully furnished cosmetology lab, an automotive lab, and more. The project is being delivered through a design-build contract. Phase 1 construction is 90% complete and will open later this year, pending FEMA approval of the additional scope. The Abraham's Phase 2 contract is under review for expansion to the culinary kitchen, additional teaching space upstairs, and additional lobby and administrative spaces.



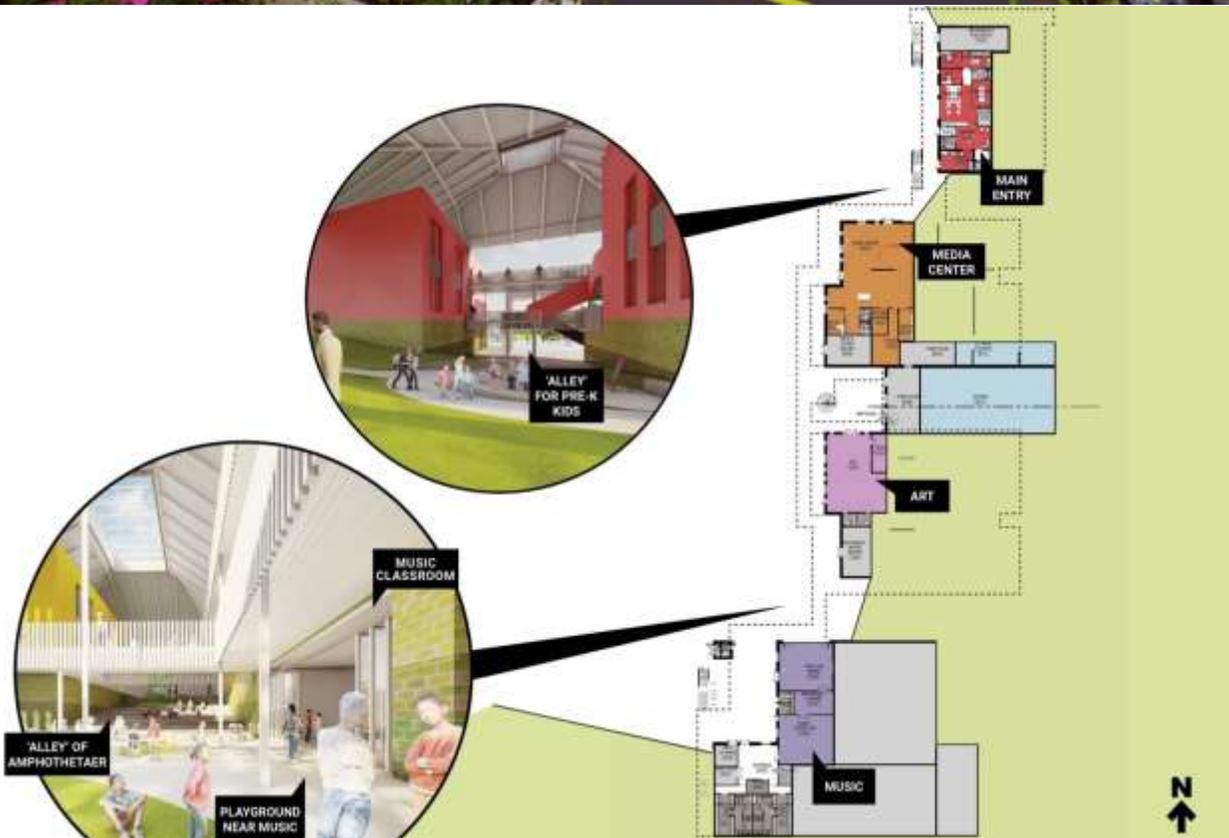
Abraham Campus (Modernization) - Continued



Ongoing Projects – Design (renderings by DLR Group)

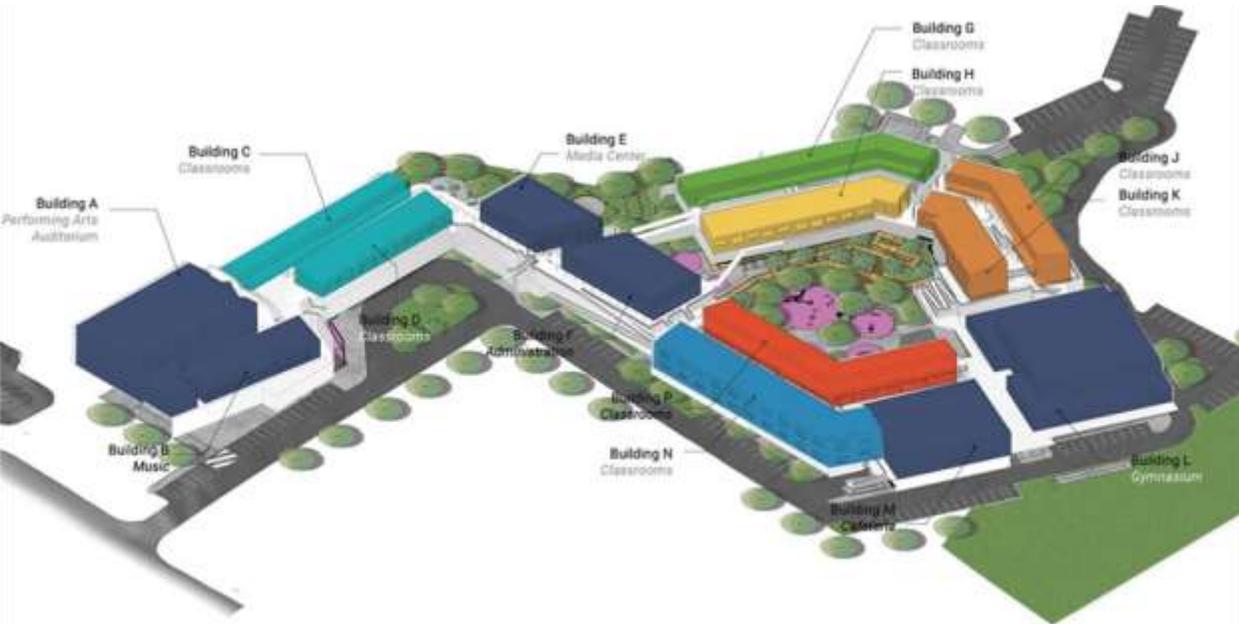
Alexander Henderson PreK-8 (New Build)

Alexander Henderson PK – 8 is a New Build project serving 575 students in grades PreK to 8. Design has advanced to 30% bridging documents and will be part of St. Croix Education Bundle 1 which is scheduled to go out for bids next year.



Boschulte PreK-8 (Modernization) (30% design completed, construction contract pending)

Bertha C Boschulte School PK–8 is a Modernization project that will serve 1070 students in grades PreK-8. The project creates a PreK center with its own entrance, two wings for elementary students, and a building dedicated for grades 6-8 with gated entry. The auditorium suite will be a hardened Saferoom and serve as a hurricane shelter. Young children in Bovoni and Nadir will attend school in their area. Design has advanced to 30% Bridging documents and the Design-Build contract is pending. Click here to view the [Boschulte PreK-8 flyover](#).



Charlotte Amalie High School (New Build) (30% design completed, construction contract pending)

Charlotte Amalie High School is a New Build project serving 1350 students in grades 9 through 12 and supporting adult Career and Technical Education for evening courses. The school will feature outdoor learning spaces, customized spaces for the JROTC program, a new library/media center with space for the Danish archives and alumni history, and more. The gymnasium is designed to serve as a Saferoom and will be used by the community as a hurricane shelter. Design has advanced to 30% bridging documents and the Design-Build contract is pending award. Demolition will begin after historic preservation mitigation measures are completed. Click here to view the [Charlotte Amalie High School flyover](#).



Claude O. Markoe PreK-8 (New Build) (30% design completed)

Claude O. Markoe PK - 8 is a Modernization and Expansion Project serving 1070 students in grades PreK to 8. Design has advanced to 30% bridging documents and will be bid as St. Croix Education Bundle 1 next spring.



Edith Williams Alternative Education Academy (New Build) (Design programming in progress)

Edith Williams Alternative School is a Modernization and Expansion Project serving students in grades 7 to 12. The school will serve students in need of additional academic support outside of their home school. Architectural services have been awarded through ODR Master Agreement. The project is in the programming phase of design. In April 2024, the design team met with the VIDE leadership team, principal, teachers, CTE director, CTE board executive director and students to kick off the school programming visioning session. Discussions with VIDE leadership and special education are taking place to finalize the program to meet Territory needs.



Julius E. Sprauve PreK-12 (New Build) (Note: 30% design completed)

Julius E. Sprauve PreK-12 is a new build on the island of St. John serving 460 students grades from pre-kindergarten to the grade 12. The government of the Virgin Islands recently acquired land in Estate Catherineberg for the school.



*Lockhart PreK-8 with 6-8 (Modernization Addition) (30% design completed, in STT Bundle 1)**

Lockhart PK – 8 is a Modernization and Expansion project serving 1070 students in grades PreK-8. Students in grades 6-8 will be in a separate part of the campus in their own buildings. The project includes a new gymnasium and athletic field. Design has advanced to 30% bridging documents and is out to bid as part of St. Thomas Education Bundle 1.



St. Croix Central High School (New Build) (30% design completed, construction contract pending)

St. Croix Central High School is a New Build project serving students in grades 9 through 12 with spaces to support agriculture and technology CTECH programs and media and the arts. A wellness pavilion requested by students will be built early in the project. Design has advanced to 30% bridging documents and the Design-Build contract is pending award. Demolition of the damaged gymnasium will begin first, and the first phase of construction will start on the south side of the campus. The construction will be completed in phases working from the south to the north. [Central High School flyover.](#)



St. Croix Education Complex (Modernization) (Design programming in progress)

The St. Croix Education Complex and CTEC High School is a Modernization and Addition project serving students in grades 9 to 12 and adult Career and Technical Education in the evenings. The schools will accommodate growth from serving 893 students to a target capacity of 1,500 when completed. Architecture firm has been awarded through the ODR architecture and engineering (A&E) Indefinite Delivery Indefinite Quantity (IDIQ) Master Agreement. The project is in the programming phase of design. In May 2024, the design team and VIDE Operations, New Schools unit staff held a workshop with the VIDE leadership team and at Ed Complex and CTEC with principals, teachers, and students to kick off the school programming visioning session. Focus groups with lead teachers in academic disciplines, career pathways and administrators will be completed before teachers leave for summer break.

St. Thomas / St. John Education Administration Center

The Virgin Islands Department of Education is currently in negotiation for the purchase of land at the former Island Block location.

St. Croix Education Administration Center

The Department has obtained FEMA approval to acquire property to build an administration center to house district and state offices. Design programming has begun. The land purchase of 23 acres is completed. Design programming has begun.



Planned Projects

We're planning the construction of new facilities to accommodate the growing needs of our student body. This includes new classrooms, laboratories, and multipurpose spaces designed to foster collaboration and innovation. Each learning community will include space for teachers to work and prep and spaces for students to receive hands-on project-based learning, small group instruction as well as indoor/outdoor spaces. Traditional classrooms are transformed into learning studios with mobile furniture of various sizes that teachers and students can easily reconfigure to support differentiated instruction. The learning studios will be technology rich and filled with natural light.

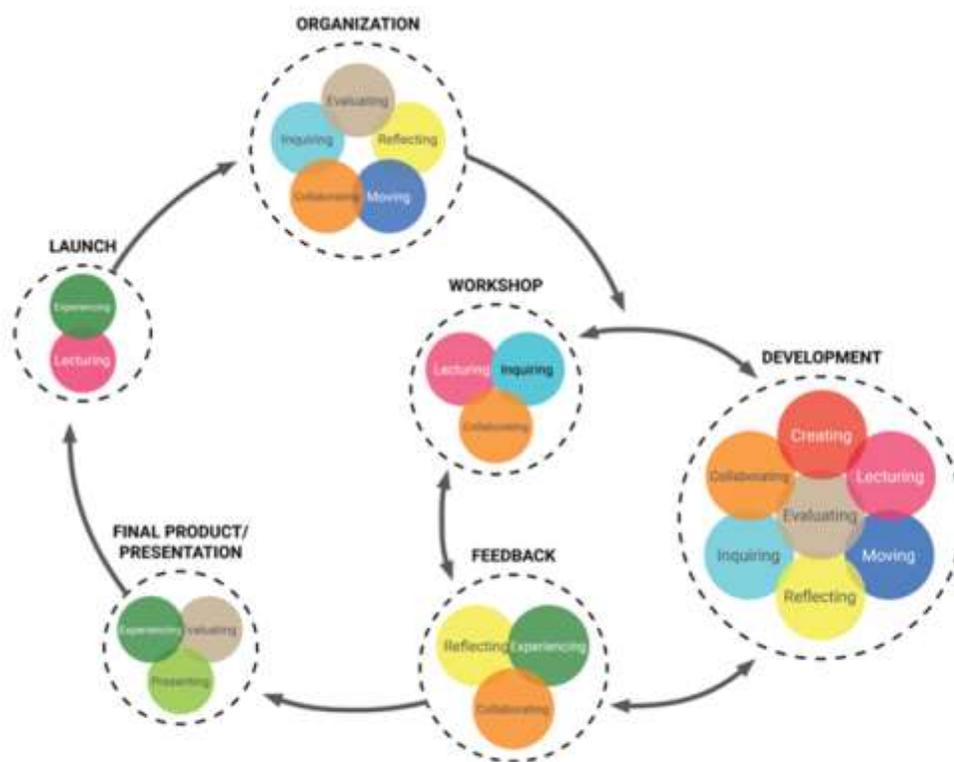


Projects Being Planned (denotes projects in St. Thomas Bundle 1 that is out for bid)*

- Alfredo Andrews PreK-8 (New Build)
- Dunbavin Alternative Education Center
- E. Benjamin Oliver PreK-8 (Modernization and Addition) *
- Guy H. Benjamin Cultural and Center and Park (Modernization)
- Ivanna Eudora Kean High School (New Build) *
- Jane E. Tuitt PreK-3 (New Build) *
- John H. Woodson Discovery Center (Modernization)
- Juanita Gardine PreK-8 (New Build)
- Pearl B. Larsen PreK-8 (New Build)
- Ulla F. Muller PreK-8 (New Build)
- Yvonne Milliner Bowsky PreK-8 with 6-8 (Modernization and Addition) *

Planning Future Facing Learning Spaces

Our schools, like most schools built more than 40 years ago, rely primarily on the traditional classroom as the main learning space and all classrooms are the same size. The traditional classroom is designed for 30 students to sit and receive a lecture from the teacher and the student remains inside the classroom other than to go to special classes or lunch. Educational practice has changed significantly since we were in school. The lecture is one of many teaching modes and teachers are expected to use other teaching modes most of the time. DLR Group worked with the New Schools Construction Advisory Board and provided images of flexible learning spaces that you will see in the following pages. The different types of spaces that will be included in every learning community to accommodate differentiated instruction are shown in the diagram below. These spaces are of different sizes and configurations. The term learning studio replaces the term classroom.



Workshop participants identified Inquiry-Based Learning as their number one Learning Connection priority.

Planning Future Facing Learning Spaces - Continued



Bottom A pair in St. Thomas review their prioritization of the curriculum and instruction VALUES cards before sharing out with the larger group.





Planning for Furniture

We are working to furnish our schools with furniture that has been researched and designed to support the needs of growing children. The new furniture will not be one-size-fits-all, rather it will support students' natural need for movement and play throughout the day. Spaces will be designed to allow students to take breaks from the larger group while still being under the watchful eye and care of teachers. The furniture is critical to the success of the buildings as educational spaces and supports the whole child in social and emotional learning.



Dr. Dieter Breithecker is a German Health and Kinetics Scientist, the head of the Federal Institute on the Development of Posture and Exercise in Germany, and an international expert on ergonomics for children.

Planning for Career and Technical Education Spaces

We've been busy working with education and industry leaders to develop architectural programming for facilities that will support Career and Technical Education (CTE). CTE facilities are integrated into the design of all New Schools and Modernizations for the high schools. VIDE and architects are working with CTE State Director, Monique Faulkner, Ph.D., and Director of Instructional Development, Yvett McMahon-Arnold, Ph.D., and coordinating with the Curriculum Development Committee to match CTE curriculum with building infrastructure.

Bottom *A small group in St. Thomas reviewing the curriculum and instruction VALUES cards.*



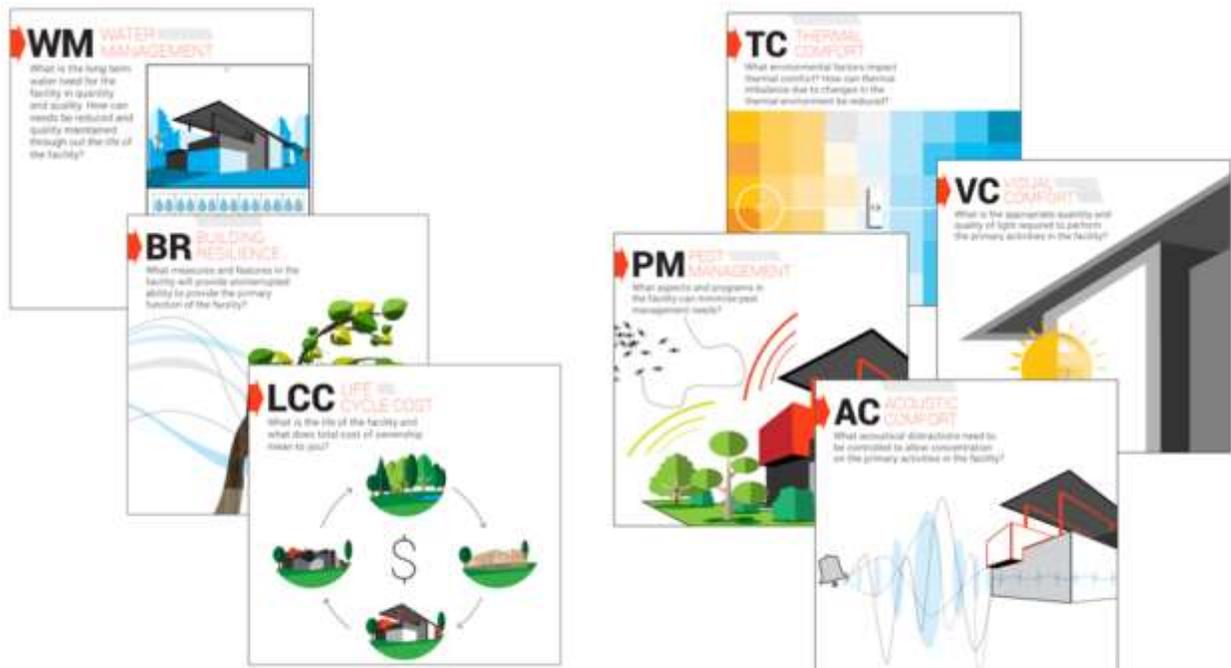
Planning for Career and Technical Education Spaces – Continued

We have established a CTE Partners Committee which includes the state directors mentioned as well at the CTE Board, Board of Education, University of the Virgin Islands, Government Agencies, and Territory and Mainland industry partners to ensure that the New Schools and Modernization initiative portfolio is built to meet the future training and employer needs for the Territory.



Planning for Sustainability – Net Zero Ready

We've designed the schools to be New-Zero-Ready. Schools will have solar panels and the infrastructure to accommodate additional batteries that would support off-the-grid operation for extended periods. This will reduce operating costs. While FEMA did not provide funding for full Net-Zero campuses that would operate independently of WAPA and put excess power back into the grid to help WAPA, VIDE will work with the Office of the Governor's Energy Office pursue energy grant opportunities.



Common Vocabulary: VALUES framework
Top ranked cards in relation to resiliency and systems.

Common Vocabulary: VALUES framework
Top ranked cards in relation to health and comfort.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I implore this committee to prioritize education funding in your deliberations when it comes to the allocations. By investing in our schools and students today, we are investing in the future prosperity and well-being of our territory. Thank you for your attention to this critical issue and I stand ready to assist in any way possible.

Ms. Callwood and I are prepared to answer any questions regarding my testimony and provide additional information or clarification as needed.