



COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

November 16, 2023



GOVERNMENT OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS
VIRGIN ISLANDS BOARD OF EDUCATION



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Good morning Honorable Marise C. James, Chairwoman of the Committee on Education and Workforce Development, committee members, other members of the 35th Legislature present, and the listening and viewing audience; I am Dr. Kyza A. Callwood, Chairman of the 21st Virgin Islands Board of Education (hereinafter VIBE or the Board). Thank you for the invitation to provide comments regarding the recent teacher and student protests as well as other matters that the Virgin Islands Board of Education would like to address.

I would first like to take this opportunity to say, "Happy American Education Week (AEW) 2023," which is observed in honor of public-school communities from November 13 – 17, 2023. The theme for this year is "Together for Safe, Just, & Equitable Schools." Furthermore, in keeping with the AEW theme, the Board has accepted US Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona's 2023 goal of "Raise the Bar" in order "to promote academic excellence, improve learning conditions, and prepare our students for a world where global engagement is critical to our nation's standing." This year, the Virgin Islands Board of Education will join the rest of the country in honoring, energizing, and inspiring students, parents, teachers, substitutes, paraprofessionals, school nurses, monitors, cafeteria workers, crossing guards, bus drivers, maintenance staff, janitors, coaches, administrators, support staff, union representatives, and other employees.

American Education Week follows the Virgin Islands' Liberty Day and precedes Thanksgiving Day. This is an ideal occasion to remind Virgin Islanders that we must not take our right to free education for granted and must always strive for quality education while expressing thanks and paying tribute to those who battled for such privileges. To safeguard the prosperity of future generations', we must always fight for advancement in education.

The VIBE commemorated AEW by collaborating with the Office of Senator Marise C. James, Chairperson of the Committee on Education and Workforce Development, and other organizations to offer a week of activities. Furthermore, Board members from both districts will visit schools and provide presentations to various Parent-Teacher Associations. VIBE encourages everyone to turn a week-long celebration into a life-long commitment to supporting public education by engaging in the following activities:

1. Express gratitude to a teacher or education support professional who has had a good impact on your life.
2. Volunteer your time or contribute other resources to educational programs and initiatives such as school improvement projects, literacy programs, and athletic programs.

MISSION STATEMENT

The mission of the Virgin Islands Board of Education is to provide leadership and oversight, set policy, and advocate for continuous improvement of the Public Education System of the Virgin Islands of the United States.

VISION STATEMENT

Each child is provided with the best quality education, which guarantees academic excellence, promotes our history and culture, and builds strong local and global communities.

3. Show your support for your child and school by attending parent-teacher conferences and engaging in parent-teacher association activities.
4. Advocate for education by participating in discussions, campaigning for policy, and donating to promote quality education.

Furthermore, the Board provided Financial Literacy Presentations at the St. Croix Educational Complex and the Ivanna Eudora Kean High School in collaboration with Oriental Bank and the St. Thomas Federal Credit Union, respectively. The goal is to offer students with a pathway to success. A solid foundation of general education, financial comprehension, good habits, and a strong work ethic provides a solid platform for financing further education, diversifying revenue sources, budgeting, debt management, credit building, and investing. We would like to convey our gratitude to Attallah R. Bertrand-Rogers (Oriental Bank, Manager, USVI Region) and Keisha L. Richards (St. Thomas Federal Credit Union, CEO) for agreeing to make their organization accessible for the presentations. More presentations will be made to Charlotte Amalie High School and St. Croix Central High School soon.

TEACHER AND STUDENT PROTESTS

The Virgin Islands has a long history of uprisings, protests, and activism. Most notable are the 1733 St. John insurrection, the first slave revolution in the Western Hemisphere, followed by the 1848 St. Croix Slave Rebellion, 1878 St. Croix Fire Burn, 1892 St. Thomas Coal Workers strike, and 1916 St. Croix Labor Union Strike.

Today, our community continues to be supported by labor rights advocates that embody the spirit of the "Queens of the Fire Burn," David Hamilton Jackson, Theobald Brow, and Ralph de Chabert. These pioneers blazed the pathway and made it possible for fair compensation, reasonable raises, secure employment, secure healthcare, affordable insurance, livable retirement, and the freedom to express concerns without fear of punishment. Though there has been much advancement in our current living and working conditions, there is still much work to be done. In recent years, the education community has led the charge for fair, just, learning, and working conditions in schools with the following action:

- 1988, Tired of their needs being ignored, the students at Ivanna Eudora Kean High School (IEKHS) led a march to Government House and the VI Legislature demanding better conditions at the school. The students were fed up with one condition– there was no gymnasium. Less than a year later \$600,000 was appropriated to build the schools' first gymnasium.
- January 2001, St. Croix Teachers protested for owed negotiated payments.
- April 2010, St. Thomas Teachers protested policies thought to be in violation of their contract.
- February 2011, St. Croix Teachers protested pay freeze.
- April 2016, St. Thomas – St. John AFT school teachers strike over retroactive payments.
- April 2018, St. Croix AFT protested stagnant wages and the conditions in learning facilities.
- May 2021, students protested hybrid graduations.
- April 2022, St. Thomas – St. John AFT protested working conditions in schools; and
- Most recently, September 2023, St. Croix Teachers and Students protest conditions in schools.

The Virgin Islands Board of Education (VIBE) is contributing to the movement by carrying the torch to provide leadership, oversight, and advocacy for continuous improvement of the Public Education System of the Virgin Islands. The VIBE, through its standing committees, regularly conducts site visits to provide repair and maintenance recommendations for a safe, healthy, productive learning and working environment. This is done to guarantee that every student is given the best possible education. Standards of excellence are ensured by the implementation of policies, rules, and laws. To encourage high-quality training, the credentials of the professional personnel are examined. To ensure that every child has access to higher education and financial support, scholarship possibilities are offered. Finally, VIBE gives parents and children a place to file complaints and appeals related to Virgin Islands Public School issues.

In remembrance and honor of the sacrifices made, the Board will continue to advocate for the next generation of fire sparkers, conch shell blowers, flame keepers, torchbearers, and movers and shakers to guarantee academic excellence, promote our rich history and culture, and build strong local and global communities.

OTHER MATTERS

Prior to the passing of Act 8717 establishing the Bureau of School Construction & Maintenance in April of this year, Title 17 Education, Chapter 3 Virgin Islands Board of Education, § 24 School management accountability mandated “(a) The Board of Education shall: (1) in consultation with the Department of Education, conduct a thorough annual assessment and evaluation of all public-school facilities, school guidance division, and school administration in the territory.” In the absence of a functioning Bureau, the Board is committed to ensuring that schools are safe, healthy, and conducive to learning. As such, VIBE’s School Plant & Facilities (SPF) Committee conducted a fall 2023 back-to-school walkthrough which provided valuable insight into the state of public schools in the Territory. Site visits were conducted from August 2nd through August 16th. A walkthrough inspection report was issued to the Department of Education, Office of the Governor, Office of the Lieutenant Governor, Office of Congresswoman Stacey E. Plaskett, the 35th Legislature of the Virgin Islands, School administrators, and PTA representatives which provided an overview of the condition of each school along with recommended actions to ensure a productive start to the 2023-2024 school year. These findings and recommendations guide the Virgin Island Board of Education in making informed decisions to support students' and staff's well-being and experience.

Walkthroughs were driven by a comparative review of maintenance projects outlined in the Virgin Islands Department of Education’s (The Department or VIDE) school-by-school summer maintenance projects listing provided during a July 7, 2023, SPF Committee meeting. This review revealed that approximately 70% of the work was either started and/or completed, with the remaining 30% stalled and/or pending startup. It is also noted that some of the projects have been identified since the 2022-2023 school year and prior. The Department’s Maintenance Team identified and shared several contributing factors which resulted in delays of work plans and schedules. Challenges & Concerns include:

1. The volume of work required for maintenance projects far surpasses the available manpower both by VIDE maintenance staff and contracted maintenance providers.

2. Maintenance problems/issues which are caused and/or delayed by external factors do not appear to get the urgent attention required the agencies of jurisdiction such as the Water and Power Authority, Department of Public Works, Waste Management Authority etc.
3. A lengthy procurement process coupled with an ongoing scarcity of supplies and materials locally continues to be a major factor which impacts negatively on the Department's ability to resolve maintenance issues in a timely manner.
4. Certain maintenance issues are classified as capital improvement projects and therefore cannot be addressed by the maintenance staff.

Common Findings:

1. **Fire Safety:** Fire extinguishers have been appropriately spaced across campuses, therefore improving safety and compliance for inspections, functionality, and school alerts.
2. **General Safety:** There are slip and fall hazards throughout most of the campuses, which need posted warning signs to protect students and personnel.
3. **Infrastructure Improvements:** Renovations have been undertaken in various schools, to include installation of new tiles, floors, ceilings, and the application of a fresh coat of paint. Additionally, AC filters have been replaced or cleaned to maintain optimal air quality.
4. **Water Accessibility:** Schools have transitioned to cistern water, with access to potable water if required, ensuring a stable campus water supply in emergency situations. Additionally, schools are receiving bottled water supplies as an alternative to water fountains which may be inoperable or have poor water quality.
5. **Maintenance Needs:** Several schools require exterior door replacements, missing light shades, alarm system upgrades, and kitchen equipment installation etc.
6. **Custodial Needs:** while restrooms are clean, they are not stocked with basic necessities.

Recommendations:

1. **Safety First:** Prioritize safety measures such as:
 - a. Plug stoppers (particularly in pre-K and kindergarten classes)
 - b. Utilize caution tape/signage to make students and personnel aware of dangers around them.
 - c. Conduct a comprehensive playground and gym safety assessment of structures, equipment, and surrounding debris before student use to enhance safety measures.
 - d. Implement proper material disposal practices to avoid waste storage around campuses therefore promoting a safe, clean, and organized learning environment.
 - e. **Communication Systems:**
 - i. Upgrade and install functional alarm systems, camera systems, intercom systems, and electrical systems (to include charging stations for school issued devices to prevent a strain on the existing electrical system).
 - ii. School intercom systems are important to improve building/campus security and expeditious emergency broadcasts.
 - iii. Intercoms allow urgent messages to deter, warn, and reduce risks of loss of life and injury as well as loss of property and damage.
 - iv. Schools need efficient and reliable intercom systems which include live video monitoring of remote areas and visitor entry; emergency notification; walkie talkies; wall mounted, strategically place loudspeakers; working phone system; and smart televisions in key locations.

2. **Historical Property Considerations:** Address challenges posed by historical property regulations promptly to facilitate necessary repairs and improvements.
3. **Adequate Resources:** Allocate resources for installing new kitchen equipment and completing ongoing projects. Many of the product acquisition issues seem avoidable. Project and order standard materials such as lights, tiles, AC filters etc. beginning in January or the 2nd half of the school year to ensure optimal functioning facilities.
4. **Capital Improvement Projects:** There is a need for information sharing and discussions between and amongst Faculty & Staff, Maintenance Leadership, Division of New Schools, and VIDE Administration regarding maintenance vis-à-vis capital improvement plans and projects. During the walkthrough, some school-based leaders were informed for the first time that certain maintenance requests were placed on hold due to being classified as capital projects.
5. **Cafeteria:** School Lunch needs to be a component of school reopening. Many non-maintenance issues need to be addressed such as boxed kitchen equipment in cafeterias.
6. **Sanitary Concerns:** All schools need health and sanitizing supplies readily available for students. Basic needs such as toilet paper, paper towel, soap and hand sanitizers should always be available in restrooms.
7. **Walkthroughs** – (twofold approach) - Ancillary agency maintenance inspections occur at the end of the summer break (late July/early August). However, school begins the second week of August, resulting in many safety issues, legal standards, and regulatory codes needing to be addressed or met. The current process must allow adequate time for warnings and implementing corrective measures before school opens. As a result, the School Plant and Facilities Committee strongly recommends conducting school inspections utilizing a twofold approach.

Phase I: Initial School Walkthrough to identify target areas – End of School year (April 22nd – May 4th, 2024). Ancillary agencies will conduct these walkthroughs with VIDE maintenance personnel to focus on health, safety, security, and facilities' readiness for occupancy. Safety and repair & maintenance issues such as fire detectors, kitchen hoods, exposed wires, light fixtures, A.C. filters, generators, cisterns, and other violations can be identified. Preliminary findings and recommendations for immediate corrective action should then be expeditiously (within 5-7 days of inspection) issued to the Virgin Islands Department of Education, providing adequate time to purchase materials and equipment, assign maintenance teams, procure vendor services, and commence work to address problems and inspection concerns to ensure that facilities are safe, healthy, and environmentally sound for occupancy upon school opening.

Phase II: Final Walkthrough to review corrective actions and issue final report - Late summer (July 1 - 12, 2024). These walkthroughs will focus on recommended Phase I corrective action for repairs and maintenance, compliance with OSHA, Fire E.M.S., and other code regulations and health and safety guidelines implemented to make schools compliant for students, personnel, and the public. A final report should then be expeditiously (within 5-7 days of inspection) issued to the Virgin Islands Department of Education.

- 8. Certificate of Occupancy** - Annual school walkthrough reports indicate to the Board and the Department that building codes and occupancy requirements are acceptable or deficient as specified by law. Conversely, certificates of occupancy indicate to occupants and visitors of facilities that the site or structure meets building compliance requirements. They, therefore, are safe, healthy, and in suitable condition for occupancy. Much like commercial establishments must display business licenses and inspection certificates; the Board strongly recommends amending Act 8717 to require that each ancillary agency inspect and provide each school with proof of compliance. Upon implementing corrective measures and issuing a final report, certificates of occupancy shall be displayed in the main office or other visible public spaces of facilities. These certificates of occupancy from various agencies shall be valid for one (1) year as public notification of inspection and compliance.

Concerns:

Modular classrooms often start out as temporary fixtures on school grounds before becoming a permanent part of campus. Because they are designed to for temporary use, modular classrooms are more likely to:

- Develop structural problems such as water leaks or cracks faster than permanent school buildings
- Be outfitted with pressed-wood furniture and vinyl walls which release unhealthy fumes (*mold inhalation is extremely dangerous for children and personnel*)

Many studies repeatedly indicate that prolonged mold exposure can cause concerning levels of respiratory distress in children, especially those with asthma or sensitive lungs. Most recently, research from the World Health Organization (WHO) found a direct link between indoor mold exposure in children and the development of asthma. For children with asthma, mold spores can trigger frequent attacks as well as cause chronic lung disease and neurological issues. According to the EPA, keeping indoor humidity levels below 60% is crucial to mold control. Staff should try to maintain an indoor humidity level between 25% and 50%. This can be achieved through proper ventilation and the use of air conditioners and dehumidifiers. Dehumidifiers drastically reduce indoor humidity, making environments less inviting to mold. For example, if there is a water stain on the ceiling, chances are it is due to an ongoing leak. Addressing the problem can prevent a mold problem from growing unimpeded.

The Board also finds that some schools are not utilizing available spaces to their maximum potential. Additional space can be maximized by incorporating agriculture programs and recreational facilities. School playgrounds provide a unique opportunity to meet kids where they are, helping them become smarter, healthier, and stronger through play. Studies show that outdoor physical activity not only benefits a child's health but improves classroom performance, increases cognitive development, and hones social skills. Schools play a critical role in helping ensure that children are getting adequate outdoor physical activity through recess and outdoor classroom time where kids can play and learn on *age and developmentally appropriate playgrounds*. In fact, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that children get 60 minutes of physical activity per day.

Follow-up:

The Board met with the Department's leadership team on October 20, 2023, to discuss the SPF Committee's findings and review the progress of the 30-day St. Croix maintenance project proposal. During the meeting, a request was made for additional condensed information and documentation to be submitted to VIBE by November 15, 2023, on the following issues:

1. Air quality testing – *quantity, sites, dates, and results completed.*
2. Drinking water distribution – *quantity, dates, and sites*
3. Intercoms systems installation – quantity, dates, and sites
4. Camera System Installation – quantity, dates, and sites
5. Debris removal – sites, dates, types (e.g., trailers, materials, equipment, etc.)
6. Ceiling Fan Installation – quantity, sites, and dates
7. Risk and hazards signs posting for drinking water, tripping, or falling alerts as well as type of signs and sites.
8. Report from UVI indicating ant vs termites in trees at Central High School.
9. Kitchen Equipment
 - a. Report regarding installation of Kitchen equipment to include listing of schools and projected completion dates.
 - b. Protection/relocation of Central High School's kitchen equipment
10. Work Order Process – Copy of document, instructions to leadership and personnel, marketing, and dissemination process to include feedback to the originator regarding the status.
11. Names and positions of New Schools Construction Advisory Board – senators, VIDE leadership, union members, community members, parents, and students – next two meeting dates, times, and site.
12. Plans to 1) increase/hire manpower and maintenance staff and 2) training/upgrading maintenance workers plan for 2023-2024
13. Adjustments for Alternative Education
 - a. Restrict cars parked on inner campus area.
 - b. Provide creative recreation areas for student.
 - c. Provide conducive areas for student meals.
14. Patriotism, national & territorial intent - Flying of American & Virgin Islands flags on campuses.
15. Update Project/Phase
 - a. Eulalie Rivera
 - b. Lew Muckle
 - c. Ricardo Richards
 - d. Alfredo Andrews
 - i. A new addition will be built to house the school. *What does this mean?*
 - ii. This property will be shuttered. *What does this mean?*
16. John H. Woodson Junior High School Closure update – mitigation of B/Math wing, gym access to restrooms, major leaks, auditorium, stage, music room outlets
17. Joseph Gomez School
 - a. Projected demolition of Joseph Gomez building near Pre-kg classrooms
 - b. Reconsideration - covering of gut at Joseph Gomez School near the playground

CONCLUSION

Aside from instruction, the safety of children on school grounds is the primary responsibility of any school. As a result, every school must ensure that health and safety laws are followed. Both the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) advocate for a healthy physical environment in schools to promote learning which includes exposure to biological or chemical agents and other physical factors such as temperature, sound, and illumination. A well-maintained facility, on the other hand, is directly related to higher student accomplishment. A disruption-free school facility boosts teaching time and reduces teacher turnover by 25%. However, the difficulty with a public school's failure to provide a comprehensive facilities management plan is finance. Local and federal governments provide funding based on a National Funding Formula (NFF) per-pupil basis. Investing in school infrastructure upgrades and repairs can benefit students, staff, and the school community tremendously. Upgraded technology, facilities, and equipment can improve the learning experience by making it more engaging, intuitive, and accessible to all students. Additionally, investing in school infrastructure displays a commitment to providing children with the finest education possible while making the school atmosphere safer and more welcoming.

As stated in prior testimonies before this body, “for many years the Board has consistently reported its findings on the state of public schools with no resultant and necessary investment in public school facilities and infrastructure.” A new school year has begun. In addition to actions taken by the maintenance division to make schools safe and healthy, the Committee observed and noted minimal or lack of involvement of other support agencies, scarcity of products and resources, potentially dangerous issues that could lead to litigious action, and a lengthy procurement process. Of the conditions observed, those that fall into the dangerous and hazardous category are of acute concern. These areas require renewed and serious attention as some situations border on peril. Maintenance services must be timely and ongoing to reduce the myriad of current problems. Additionally, service options and remediation plans should be identified and shared to prepare for new and ever-evolving issues. The committee strongly recommends expediting the more pressing issues at specific schools to ensure safe environments and prevent disruption of programs as well as addressing common concerns which affect all students and personnel.

We ask for your support to advocate for the prompt repair and maintenance of public schools in the Territory. Education is a shared responsibility. The success of Education is driven by the collective responsibility taken, and contributions made through accountability, commitment, and leadership by all stakeholders, including students, teachers, parents, administrators, unions, public officials, ancillary agencies, and community partners. Each group of persons must analyze the recommendations provided by VIBE and help carry the torch to make significant, positive, and required changes in structural deficiencies and collaboratively reduce the challenges that diminish opportunities for students' greatness. The moment has come to "Raise the Bar Together for Safe, Just, & Equitable Schools." Let us all do our share to provide leadership, monitoring, and advocacy for the continued improvement of the United States Public Education System in the Virgin Islands. Chairwoman James, thank you again for allowing the Virgin Islands Board of Education to provide testimony. We stand ready to answer questions.