

21ST VIRGIN ISLANDS BOARD OF EDUCATION

Committee on Education and Workforce Development
Testimony - February 12, 2024



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.

**GOVERNMENT OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS
VIRGIN ISLANDS BOARD OF EDUCATION**



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St. Croix Office
1115 Strand Street
Suite 201-B
Christiansted, VI 00820
Telephone No. 340-772-4144

St. Thomas Office
P.O. Box 11900
Dronningens Gade
Nos. 60B, 61 & 62
St. Thomas, VI 00801
Telephone No. 340-774-4546

WEBSITE
www.myviboe.com

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). In the St. Croix Chambers are Vice Chair Emmanuella Perez-Cassius, Chairperson of the School, Plants & Facilities Committee Winona A. Hendricks, and Associate Executive Director Samanta Prentice. Thank you for the invitation to provide comments regarding the condition of school facilities throughout the territory, status of John H. Woodson Junior High School, renovation of bathrooms at St. Croix Central High School and St. Croix Educational Complex as well as other matters of concern the Board of Education may have.

I would first like to take this opportunity to acknowledge Black History Month as we celebrate and honor the legacy of the rich history, achievements, and contributions of black individuals and communities. Today, throughout the month and forever, sing the Black national anthem, “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” loudly and proudly because our song is a powerful expression of cultural identity, resilience, and unity.

Prior to the passage of Act 8717 establishing the Bureau of School Construction & Maintenance in April of 2023, 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 remains committed to ensuring that schools are safe, healthy, and conducive to learning. As such, VIBE’s School Plant & Facilities (SPF) Committee conducted school site visits to gain additional insight into the state of school facilities throughout the territory. Visits commenced on January 19, 2024 and concluded on February 9, 2024. The Committee is once again preparing for school visits to conduct curricula and instruction assessments as mandated by Act 8717.

CONDITION OF SCHOOL FACILITIES TERRITORY-WIDE

As stewards of educational excellence, it is incumbent upon us to confront the imminent challenges surrounding the condition of our esteemed school facilities with unwavering resolve and scholarly acumen.

In recent deliberations and school visits, it has become patently clear that certain facets of our school infrastructure necessitate diligent attention and meticulous upkeep to ensure the continued

MISSION STATEMENT

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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.

safety, functionality, and scholarly ambiance for our esteemed students and faculty. These concerns encompass a spectrum of considerations, ranging from the structural integrity of our building to the efficacy of our amenities and communal spaces.

During our school visits, the same theme and looming concerns resonated in the school facilities which in some way impacts the learning environment, student safety, and overall well-being. Some of these concerns include but are not limited to:

1. **Aging Infrastructure:** Many school buildings suffer from aging infrastructure, including deteriorating and leaking roofs, plumbing systems, and electrical wiring, which can lead to safety hazards and operational inefficiencies. Electrical upgrades are imperative to support the installation of air condition units in all classrooms as well as increased use of technology to support the curriculum. Additionally, challenges posed in some schools by historical property regulations should be promptly addressed to facilitate necessary repairs and improvements.
2. **Deferred Maintenance:** Budget constraints and insufficient manpower often result in deferred maintenance, where necessary repairs and upkeep are postponed, exacerbating existing issues and potentially causing further damage over time.
3. **Safety and Security:** Inadequate security measures, such as outdated door locks, insufficient lighting, non-functional cameras, and intercoms compromise the safety of students and staff, leaving them vulnerable to intruders or emergencies. There are slip and fall hazards throughout most of the campuses. Warning signs or caution tape should be posted to protect students and personnel. Schools need efficient and reliable ~~intercom~~ communication systems which include live video monitoring of remote areas and visitor entry; emergency notification; walkie talkies; strategically placed, wall mounted loudspeakers; working phone system; and smart televisions in key locations.
4. **Health and Environmental Hazards:** Schools are plagued by environmental hazards such as mold, asbestos, lead paint, or poor indoor air quality, which can adversely affect the health and well-being of occupants. 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. Additionally, sufficient waste disposal receptacles should be implemented around campuses therefore promoting a safe, clean, and organized learning environment. Further, while modular classrooms often start out as temporary solutions, they often become a permanent fixture on campuses. Because they are designed for temporary use, modular classrooms are more likely to develop structural problems such as water leaks or cracks faster than permanent school buildings. They are also outfitted with pressed-wood furniture and vinyl walls which release strong fumes during the off-gassing period that are irritants to persons in that environment.
5. **Overcrowding:** Overcrowded classrooms and facilities strain resources and compromise the quality of education by limiting space for learning activities, causing disruptions, and increasing the risk of accidents or injuries.

6. **Technology Infrastructure:** Insufficient or outdated technology infrastructure, including unreliable internet connectivity or obsolete equipment, hinders students' access to digital resources and impedes the integration of technology into curriculum delivery.
7. **Accessibility:** Inadequate accessibility features, such as lack of ramps, elevators, or accessible restrooms, present barriers for students and staff with disabilities, compromising their ability to fully participate in school activities and creates risk for ADA non-compliance. .
8. **Sustainability:** Many school facilities lack energy-efficient systems and sustainable practices, leading to excessive energy consumption, high operational costs, and environmental degradation. The Department is doing an excellent job with the installation of air conditioning units in classrooms. However, most classrooms need film on the windows to prevent the air from escaping and eventually overworking the units.

Addressing these looming concerns requires proactive planning, investment in infrastructure improvements, and collaboration among stakeholders to ensure that schools provide safe, inclusive, and conducive learning environments for all students and staff. While we are cognizant of the inherent complexities posed by aging infrastructure and fiscal constraints, we must not waver in our dedication to curating an environment conducive to intellectual exploration and holistic growth. In light of this imperative, I proffer a judicious course of action:

1. **Holistic Facility Assessment:** Undertake a rigorous and all-encompassing evaluation of our school facilities in concert with an esteemed consortium of stakeholders, including administrators, esteemed faculty members, maintenance personnel, and students. This diagnostic endeavor will furnish us with invaluable insights to discern priority areas necessitating intervention and strategic allocation of resources.
2. **Timely Remediation and Restoration:** Prioritize expeditious remedial measures and restorative interventions to ameliorate imminent safety hazards and ensure the seamless operation of essential amenities. These remedial actions may encompass rectifying structural deficiencies, mitigating environmental hazards, and attending to infrastructural exigencies with alacrity and precision.
3. **Strategic Infrastructure Modernization:** Conceive a visionary roadmap for the modernization and rejuvenation of our school infrastructure, guided by the empirical findings gleaned from our comprehensive assessment. This strategic blueprint shall delineate prioritized initiatives, fiscal projections, and temporal benchmarks, all imbued with a steadfast commitment to scholarly excellence and pragmatic feasibility.
4. **Transparent Engagement and Scholarly Discourse:** Cultivate an ethos of transparent engagement and scholarly discourse within our community, fostering a robust dialogue wherein concerns are clarified, insights are exchanged, and collective solutions are

iteratively refined. Soliciting the perspectives of stakeholders ensures that our collective endeavors are consonant with the aspirations and imperatives of our scholarly setting.

5. **Innovative Sustainability Paradigms:** Explore innovative sustainability paradigms and innovative technologies to augment the ecological efficiency, ergonomic functionality, and scholarly efficacy of our school facilities. By harnessing the transformative potential of sustainable infrastructure, we not only mitigate our environmental footprint but also engender a culture of conscientious stewardship and intellectual innovation.
6. **Advocacy and Resource Mobilization:** Advocate assiduously for augmented resources and collaborative support from an august consortium of stakeholders, including governmental agencies, philanthropic benefactors, and corporate partners. By galvanizing support from diverse quarters, we augment our capacity to effectuate substantive change and propel our shared scholarly aspirations to fruition.
7. **Restorative Practices and Personal Growth:** By involving students and those in our community facing less severe disciplinary actions in meaningful tasks related to school maintenance, we provide them with a tangible opportunity for restitution and personal growth. Engaging in constructive activities that contribute positively to the school community can foster a sense of responsibility, self-worth, valuable life skills, problem-solving, time management, attention to detail and belonging among participating students and other individuals.

JOHN H. WOODSON JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL

VIBE's School Plants & Facilities Committee conducted a site visit of John H. Woodson Junior High School on January 19, 2024. Progress may have been made since the school visit. However, the Committee observed routine maintenance major repairs such as painting, trimming trees, and repairing broken concrete areas in the courtyard while contractors were installing AC units. The main office and B wing visits revealed installation of the ducting system as well as replacement of hallway lights, floor tiles, ceiling tiles, and ceiling fans. Some classrooms were infested with mosquitos, which suggests the presence of standing water. However, there was insufficient information regarding air quality testing, repair of the auditorium stage due to termites, and portable bathrooms for the sprung gymnasium.

BATHROOMS, KITCHEN EQUIPMENT, & INTERCOMS

To date, there has been no communication regarding updates on capital projects. Information is acquired at site visits. VIBE encourages more communication between the department and the board. Recent visits revealed that bathroom upgrades and kitchen installation are considered capital improvement projects. Bathroom upgrades will be contracted out for approximately 114-115 bathrooms in the district. Only 1 male and 1 female bathroom in the 800 wing is being worked on at St. Croix Central High School. There are no reports of upgrades to bathroom facilities at

other schools. Installation of some kitchen equipment is finally underway. Intercoms are federally funded and are waiting for third party fiduciary to be reviewed. It is understood that priority will be given to St. Croix Central High School, St. Croix Educational Complex, Alfredo Andrews, and John H. Woodson and other schools should receive intercoms as funding becomes available.

In addressing the looming concerns surrounding the condition of our school facilities, we affirm our unwavering commitment to nurturing an ecosystem wherein erudition flourishes, intellectual inquiry thrives, and scholarly excellence knows no bounds. I extend an invitation for your esteemed collaboration and scholarly stewardship as we collectively embark upon this noble endeavor, the Department of Education and the Virgin Islands Board of Education cannot do this work by ourselves.

LEARNING GAP

Addressing learning gaps is a paramount concern in education, underscoring the commitment to equitable academic outcomes for all students. Within this context, educators employ a multifaceted approach aimed at identifying and remedying areas where students may require additional support to thrive academically.

Central to this effort is the use of diagnostic assessments, meticulously crafted to pinpoint specific areas of struggle or misunderstanding among students. These assessments serve as a springboard for tailored interventions, ensuring that instructional strategies are precisely targeted to address individual learning needs.

Differentiated instruction emerges as a cornerstone of this approach, embracing the diversity of student abilities and learning styles within the classroom. Through personalized learning plans, small group activities, and individualized instruction, educators' endeavor to provide each student with the support and resources necessary to bridge any learning gaps they may encounter.

In parallel, intervention programs are deployed to provide targeted support to students in need. These programs may encompass tutoring sessions, remedial classes, or specialized interventions delivered by trained educators or specialists, all with the aim of bolstering student comprehension and confidence.

Formative assessment practices play a pivotal role in this process, allowing educators to continuously monitor student progress and adjust instruction accordingly. By regularly assessing student learning and providing timely feedback, educators can effectively identify emerging learning gaps and tailor their instructional approaches to address them in real-time.

Collaborative learning experiences are also leveraged to great effect, with peer tutoring initiatives empowering students to support one another in mastering challenging concepts. Through collaboration and shared understanding, students not only receive the support they need but also develop important social and cognitive skills along the way.

Furthermore, the integration of educational technology serves to augment classroom instruction, offering students personalized learning experiences and opportunities for independent practice. Adaptive learning platforms, online tutorials, and educational apps provide students with the

flexibility to engage with course material at their own pace, reinforcing learning and fostering self-directed learning habits.

Family and community engagement round out the comprehensive approach to addressing learning gaps, recognizing the critical role that families and communities play in supporting student success. By fostering partnerships with families and providing resources and workshops, educators extend the learning environment beyond the classroom, reinforcing learning at home and strengthening the support network for students.

In essence, addressing learning gaps is not merely a pedagogical imperative but a moral and ethical commitment to ensuring that all students can achieve their full potential. Through a holistic and collaborative approach, educators strive to create inclusive learning environments where every student can thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

OTHER MATTERS

As Chairman of the Board, I am eagerly awaiting the confirmation of Dr. Alice Marsh and look forward to welcoming her in her new role of the At-Large seat on the Virgin Islands Board of Education. We desperately need that additional member to complement and complete our dedicated and committed team of board members. Nonetheless, the Board continues to perform at an optimal level. Through various committees and initiatives, VIBE supports the Virgin Islands Department of Education. These initiatives aim to improve student achievement, create a positive school climate, boost morale, and prepare for school occupancy in appropriately maintained educational structures.

Conversely, I think that I can speak for the entire board when I say that awarding scholarships each year makes everything else worthwhile. At this time, I would like to take the opportunity to highlight the Territorial Scholarship Fund and Special Legislative Grant Financial Program. Please visit www.myviboe.com for information regarding available scholarships, eligibility criteria for high school students and employees of the Government of the Virgin Islands and the 2024 deadline.

Chairwoman James, thank you again for allowing the Virgin Islands Board of Education to provide testimony. We stand ready to answer questions.