

**Statement of Abdul R. Ali**  
**Chairperson, St. Croix Public School Parent Coalition**  
**To**  
**COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION and WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT**

**June 17<sup>th</sup> 2024**

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Good morning, Honorable Senator Marise C. James Chairman of the Committee of Education and Workforce Development and members of this committee. I am Abdul Raheem Ali, Chairperson of the St. Croix Public School Parent Coalition. Thank you for this opportunity to appear before you today on behalf of the members of the Coalition to discuss the critical issues impacting our public education system and the need to enhance public education and introduce meaningful reforms that would, in the final analysis, be of real help to the students who attend school.

I am the president of the Lew Muckle Elementary School's PTA and I have volunteered at the school in various capacities for the past seven years. I am a graduate of the University of the Virgin Islands with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Elementary Education, and a Master of Arts in Education with an emphasis on Reading. I am a retired VI Government employee who worked at the Department of Labor for 26 years. I have held positions in the DOL as a supervisor and as a Manager of the Job Service Division. I am also a certified Workforce Development Specialist and I have had the privilege of being honored by the 26th Legislature for my contributions to the community as a Social Worker. I am the Author of a book entitled, 'Abdul R. Ali: A Matured Seed - Tended to with Helping Hands. Today, I speak to you as a parent and as an advocate for all public-school students to have access to quality education modules that will help to provide the links needed for quality learning to take place.

The St. Croix Public School Parent Coalition is a recently formed community organization of parents and PTAs in the St. Croix district. This- newly-formed-advocacy group, came into being because of its concerns with regards to the growing challenges that the territory's public school education system has faced over the years, and the pressing need to create community driven solutions that will work in the best interests of all Public-School students. Our main goal is to ensure that Education is seen as a major force for bringing about social change.

Soon after our formation, we contacted Senator, Marise C. James, Chairperson of the Committee on Education and Workforce Development Committee and made a request to her for an opportunity to

1. Lead a critical dialogue on the state of the territory's public school system
2. To craft a plan of action to resolve ongoing and longstanding concerns about the Education System and what it offers and how, and
3. To demand a greater degree of accountability than that which exists today.

None of this is to suggest that the VIDOE, the VIBOE, our teachers, parents and students have done nothing to move education forward over the years. The VIDOE has led the charge by the development of the 30-60-90 plan, which is still in progress, and the VIBOE has produced a 2023 School Management Accountability Report which addresses school profiles, maintenance matters etc. and it has also developed a Parent-Student needs survey which seeks to give parents and students a voice. Despite these efforts some huge and everlasting gaps in the education system still need to be filled for our students (the leaders of today) to make their way ahead with any degree of confidence or sense of pride. Few would disagree with me when I say that the Public-School-Education System is in crisis and that a call is needed for

1. An investment in the future of our students
2. A focus on education as a component where knowledge of one's culture and history

is gained, shared, studied and understood and 3. A unit where positive pathways could be created that would be of real benefit to those who come behind us.

With that in mind The St. Croix Public School Parent Coalition has identified, prioritized, and recommended solutions to some ten Instructional and Learning issues that have negatively affected the academic achievements of the USVI Public School students. These include 1. The provision of a transparent and timely communications plan/process to include information on changes in school administration, monthly updates on school maintenance projects, etc.

2. The teacher shortages that exist in critical areas to include, Special Education, Spanish, and Vocation/CTEH, reading/writing and STEAM. A shortage of nurses also exists. Some of these matters could be addressed by the deploying of a marketing campaign to hire individuals from Puerto Rico to address gaps in the areas mentioned.

3. The offering of a Reliable Internet School Connectivity service. This could be addressed by installing additional router access points for each school and by expanding the system to use browsers other than Chrome to facilitate regular inter-facility communications. A generator should be installed at the St. Croix Curriculum Center, the public-school internet hub, to provide an alternate power source.

4. The implementation of a Digital Learning Seamless Connectivity Platform is much needed to provide proper instruction and learning. This would eliminate manual processes (i.e. registration, school insurance tracking, fees/payments etc.).

5. The Repair and Upgrades to Playground Equipment and Areas. These are needed at every public-school facility. Please note that access to playgrounds can help relieve student stress and can enhance the learning process(es). Pearl B. Larsen, Alfredo

Andrews and Eulalie Rivera schools, which all have condemned playgrounds, are badly in need of new playgrounds and appropriate playground equipment.

6. The implementation of Bullying Prevention Measures is needed to help prevent school violence. Incident reports will be required to be completed by a teacher or school monitor, signed off by a school administrator, and sent home to parents/guardians. An after-school bullying program should be created for repeat offenders and this program should be facilitated by counselors.

7. A timely distribution of the Impress Fund is very much needed. This should be tied to a simplified process that promotes ready usage/accountability.

8. The launching of a Year-Long Reading Competition Initiative should be brought on-line immediately with the help of a district-wide marketing program. Based on research, being able to read and to understand what is being read can boost a child's IQ up to six points, enhance verbal intelligence, and promote usage/accountability.

9. The Installation/Repair of all Bathroom Structures/Fixtures, auditorium, and Kitchen Equipment of all schools is of great importance and needs immediate attention.

10. The publication and publishing of a Quarterly Air Quality and Water Quality Reports beginning July 29 2024, for each school in the St. Croix District, is very much needed. The reports should include the current statuses of the air quality and water quality issues and the plans being developed at this time to address them.

In addition to the matters raised so far the Coalition is also very much interested in updates and a status report with regards to the VI DOE's October 23, 30-60-90- Day Public Schools Project Plan. This calls for things like air quality testing, drinking water

matters, bid solicitations, bathroom upgrades, textbooks, electrical upgrades, kitchen upgrades and AC Installation, to name a few. There is a need as well for a review of the 11 St. Croix Accountability Reports provided by the schools to the DOE. How are those affecting schools? A case in point is tied to the Eulalie Rivera School which is still holding a 7.30 am to a 2 pm schedule, which is different to many of the other schools. Can something be done to adjust the schedule level? At this point I would like to share some important data information to you Senator James, and to your committee.

According to the 2004 USVI Kids Count Data Book compiled by the Community Foundation of the Virgin Islands, in 2002 93% of all 8th graders in the territory scored below proficient, or grade level in reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress Initiative. Today the St. Croix Foundation's 2023 Kids Count Data Book states that in SY 2021-22: 95% of 7<sup>th</sup> graders were not proficient (i.e., tested at Near or Below Standard) and 75% of 3<sup>rd</sup> graders were not proficient in ELA. The testing process that the VIDOE used was the Smarter Balance Assessment System. In 1996 the VI Daily News reported that 90% of incoming CHS 9<sup>th</sup> graders, many of whom were on the honor roll, had failed the basic math test. We are, it appears, still in the math and reading student failure mode today and so, a change is needed. To add to that, there are reports that special education students are, in some cases, being left behind. We simply cannot continue to leave them out. Everyone deserves a fair chance. With all of that in mind the St. Croix Public School Parent Coalition wants to make a call to the VIDOE and the VIBOE to update its needs assessment review, utilize existing data analysis methods on hand, and offer a structure of goals, objectives, priorities and plans for implementation to address the concerns raised earlier in this presentation. There is a need as well for parents of children in the public schools to 1. Help to provide solutions designed to

bridge the gaps in education 2. Partner with students to value education and its benefits and 3. Encourage students to utilize their inalienable rights and to stimulate methods and approaches to help bring about social change within the educational process.

We are now asking this Committee to consider putting into place laws that will make the DOE and the VIDOE more accountable at a public level than they are at present, to parents and students and the community at large when it comes to the utilization of data accumulated to drive educational policies, and in the final analysis to help enhance the Teacher Instruction and Student Learning models that exist.

I should also note that the St. Croix Public School Parent Coalition is not prepared to take the concerns raised earlier lightly. With that in mind by the time school begins the Coalition wants to see some substantial maintenance work carried out with regards to the repair and upgrades of playground equipment and the school kitchens and the bathrooms. The publication and publishing of Quarterly-Air- Quality and Water Reports is expected before school begins, and so too, is some transparent and timely communications plans to include changes in school administration etc. Also of importance is a timely communications plan regarding orientation, open teacher roles and a school supply listing. The Coalition would like the VIDOE to share the orientation dates no later than June 28<sup>th</sup> of 2024. It also wants news regarding the establishment of a curriculum night in early August 2024. This would call for the engagement of parents in the Education System and the building of relationships with them.

I should state here that the St. Croix Public School Parent Coalition is not prepared to take the concerns raised lightly. With that in mind by the time school begins the Coalition wants to see some substantial work being carried out with regards to the

repair and upgrades of playground equipment and the school kitchens and the bathrooms. The publication and publishing of the Quarterly Air Quality and Water Report is also expected to take place before school opens, and so too is the provision of transparent and timely communications plans to include school administration, the hiring of teachers and upgrades of school maintenance matters. These areas of concern are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and so, if they are not addressed within the timelines laid out the Coalition would have no choice but to seek the full support of parents and the community at large and in so doing, advise them that the VIC Title 17 Section 24 is not being adhered to or followed, and further, that respect for students, and the required provision of safe environmental areas for learning is being ignored.

Before I close, I want to offer a word of thanks to the members of the Coalition for their leadership and support. They are Janice Jones (Alfredo Andrews School), Kimberly Moorehead (Pearl B. Larsen School), Tamara McIntosh-George (Eulalie Rivera School), Leslie Greene (Claude O'Markoe School), Jason Henry (John H. Woodson School), Jennifer Joseph (Juanita Gardine School), Jahnella Harvey (Central High School), Maqueda Norhassan (Ricardo Richards School) Roxanne 'Baby' Alexander (Pearl B. Larsen School), Dawn O' Bryan (John H. Woodson School) and Abdul R. Ali (Lew Muckle School). I must also thank the parents and the PTAs from the various schools who provided their commitment to the idea of moving the Educational Process forward for the good of the students. I also want to offer congratulations to the recent graduates in the USVI and to thank them for their efforts to aim for higher heights.

On behalf of St. Croix Public School Parent Coalition, I offer my thanks to you and your committee, Senator Marise C. James for this opportunity to address the future of our youths.