



TESTIMONY of EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR CRAIG BENJAMIN
35TH LEGISLATURE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

09.09.24

Good day, Honorable Marise James, Chairwoman of the Committee on Education and Workforce Development, members of the Committee, other members of the 35th Legislature, other testifiers, and the listening and viewing audiences. I am Craig Benjamin, Executive Director of the Bureau of School Construction and Maintenance. I would like to take this opportunity to sincerely thank you for allowing me to share my vision and objectives for the territorial schools.

Esteemed Senators, I am deeply grateful for your foresight in proposing and enacting USVI Legislative Act 8717. This visionary legislation has paved the way for my appearance before you today. I stand ready and committed to guide the Bureau of School Construction and Maintenance toward a more promising future for our educational infrastructure.

I would also like to take a moment to thank my dedicated team and the Virgin Islands Department of Education. Their hard work, dedication, and unwavering support have been instrumental in our progress thus far. While we recognize that the path ahead is not an easy one, we are committed to making a difference and creating safe environments that are truly conducive to learning for all our Virgin Islands school attendees.

Here with me today to present our goals and plans for the territorial schools moving forward are:

- Chaneel Callwood, VIDE New Schools Architect
- Gene Weekes, VIDE Director of Maintenance (STT District)
- Yauncey Milligan, VIDE Director of Maintenance (STX District)
- Kwame Garcia, VIDE DR Project Manager
- And other support employees in the chambers

I would like to begin by addressing the transition to the Bureau of School Construction & Maintenance. Once again, I commend the legislature for its foresight in establishing this Bureau. This strategic move allows for a dedicated team to focus on educational facilities, thereby enabling the Department of Education to concentrate on its primary mission: the education of our youth.

In my current capacity, from June 17th up to today, I have prioritized a comprehensive assessment of school facilities operations. This approach of attentive observation and active listening has been instrumental in shaping our strategic transition to the newly established Bureau. Our work has and will remain collaborative with VIDE and the Office of the Governor.

Just recently, we were impacted by Tropical Storm Ernesto, which caused significant damage to several of our facilities. The storm's aftermath resulted in:

- **Water Damage-** Modular classrooms experienced flooding, and some regular classrooms also sustained water damages. This led to the growth of mildew, creating health concerns that required immediate

remediation to ensure a safe learning environment.

- **Electrical Failures-** Fluctuating power levels during the storm caused several air conditioning units to malfunction. This situation further exacerbated our maintenance challenges, leading to damaged electrical boards, blown compressors, and malfunctioning capacitors.
- **Roofing conditions-** Several large trees fell on roofs. We contracted tree-trimmers and landscapers to assist with debris removal.

In response to these events, our team worked collaboratively and diligently alongside school principals, the maintenance staff, and contractors to restore functionalities in time for school's reopening. The process involved:

- **Emergency Repairs-** Prioritizing the stabilization of classrooms and modular units affected by flooding to ensure a safe environment for students and staff. Addressing the mildew problem required deep cleaning of several of the affected modular classrooms and repairs to prevent future occurrence. Damaged ceiling tiles were removed and replaced at many of the facilities in both districts.
- **Collaboration with contractors-** Our team coordinated with external contractors to expedite repairs on AC units and electrical systems. However, delays in receiving essential equipment and supplies from suppliers limited our ability to bring all systems back online immediately.
- **On-going required maintenance-** Given that maintenance is an ongoing effort, our team is committed to continuously monitoring the performance of repaired systems and addressing any residual issues that may arise post-reopening.
- **Generators-** The installation and upgrade of generators has begun at several VIDE facilities.

As part of our preventative measures we are incorporating the use of air-purifiers, humidifiers and de-humidifiers into the classrooms and integrate mold prevention education into staff training programs. We are working on establishing a continuous indoor air quality (IAQ) monitoring program which includes:

- Installing permanent IAQ sensors throughout school buildings.
- Setting up real-time alerts for changes in humidity, temperature, and air quality.
- Establishing open communication channels between administration, staff, students, and parents regarding mold concerns.
- Establishing a hot-line directly to our office for the public to inform of any problems or issues that may arise and deploy a rapid response team to address these issues.

Presently, our primary focus is on three critical aspects of the Bureau's development: structuring the organization, assessing resource requirements, and implementing strategic improvements in school facilities, personnel, financial resources, and technological capabilities.

We are committed to defining both short- and long-term objectives and securing the requisite tools for success. This transition's effectiveness will depend on collaborative efforts and support from all key stakeholders. We will measure our success by the following goals:

- Building and operating as a high-performing and efficient team
- Aligning with industry best practices for school facility design, construction and maintenance
- Providing timely and accurate responses to school staff and the broader school community

To ensure the success of our initiative, it is imperative that we allocate resources and implement enhancements aligned with industry best practices. These will encompass:

- Increasing and developing our staff to ensure we have the resources and skillset to do the work,

- Ensuring we are able to maintain consistent and increased funding for the Bureau
- Establishing Standard Operating Procedures and Increased Process Efficiencies for our day-to-day operations which will lead to transparency and the successful operation of the Bureau.
- Fostering inter-agency cooperation and consensus to optimize operational efficiency.

At this point, I would like to focus on the maintenance of our existing educational infrastructure and outline our comprehensive strategy for improving and preserving these essential facilities. Our plan is centered around ten key initiatives:

1. Comprehensive Facility Assessment: We will conduct a thorough evaluation of all school facilities to establish a baseline for our work.

2. Implementation of Work Order System: Using our current resources, we will implement a new, state-of-the-art work order system with ongoing training provided to all maintenance personnel to ensure efficient operations.

3. Prioritized Repair System: We will categorize repairs into four tiers:

- A) Emergency
- B) Temporary
- C) Regular
- D) Summer

All repairs will be based on strict specifications to ensure quality and consistency.

Our Prioritized Repair System is designed to ensure that all maintenance and repair needs are addressed in a timely and efficient manner, based on their urgency and impact on school operations.

Each category will be broken down as follows:

A) Emergency Repairs:

- These are issues that pose immediate threats to health, safety, or the ability to conduct classes.
- Examples include major electrical failures, severe plumbing leaks, structural damage, or non- functioning fire safety systems.
- Emergency repairs will be addressed within 24 hours, with temporary solutions implemented immediately if a permanent fix requires more time.

B) Temporary Repairs:

- These are urgent issues that don't pose immediate danger but significantly impact daily operations.
- Examples might include minor roof leaks, malfunctioning air conditioning in some areas, or non- critical plumbing issues.
- Temporary repairs will be addressed within 3-5 business days, with a plan for permanent solutions to follow.

C) Regular Repairs:

- These are standard maintenance issues that don't significantly impede school operations.
- Examples include replacing worn carpeting, repainting, fixing minor cosmetic damage, or scheduled equipment maintenance.
- Regular repairs will be addressed within 2-4 weeks, based on resource availability and school schedules.

D) Summer Repairs:

- These are larger projects or non-urgent repairs that are best completed when schools are not in regular session.
- Examples include major renovations, large-scale painting projects, flooring replacements, or extensive AC work.
- Summer repairs will be planned and procured early in the school year and executed during summer break to minimize disruption.

With respect to technical specifications, we will establish and regularly update a comprehensive framework of standards governing all repair and maintenance activities. These specifications will ensure:

1. **Quality of materials:** All materials used will meet or exceed industry standards for durability and performance.
2. **Workmanship standards:** Clear guidelines will be established for how repairs should be completed, ensuring consistency across all schools.
3. **Code compliance:** All repairs will adhere to local building codes and regulations, as well as ADA requirements where applicable.
4. **Energy efficiency:** Where possible, repairs and replacements will prioritize energy-efficient solutions to reduce long-term operational costs.
5. **Documentation:** Each repair will be thoroughly documented, including the issue, solution, materials used, and any follow-up required.
6. **Vendor qualifications:** For outsourced work, we will procure a list of pre-qualified vendors who meet our stringent quality and reliability standards.

By adhering to these strict specifications, we aim to ensure that all repairs, regardless of their priority level, are completed to the highest standards. This approach will not only improve the quality of our facilities but also reduce the need for repeated repairs, ultimately saving time and resources in the long run.

This system will be regularly reviewed and adjusted based on feedback from the Commissioner of Education, school administrators, maintenance staff, and other stakeholders to ensure it continues to meet the needs of our educational community.

7. **Enhanced Leadership Team:** We plan to hire an architect to create and fill the new position of Director of Maintenance position in Act 8717 supported by two engineers, all with strong backgrounds in maintenance, to strengthen our leadership and technical expertise.

8. **Expansion of Skilled Workforce:** We will hire certified tradesmen in electrical, plumbing, carpentry, and air conditioning. Additionally, we will provide training and certification opportunities for existing laborers to promote them to tradesmen status. In addition, we will seek to partner with entities such as My Brother's Workshop in each

district as a recruitment strategy for those youth who have completed their training and are certified or are on the pathway for certification. It may also be possible for those students to complete a volunteer apprenticeship along with our skilled and certified workers to attain hands-on experience.

9. Security Enhancement: A Best Lock and Key system will be installed in all existing schools to improve safety and access control.

10. Regular Reporting to Education Commissioner: Weekly updates on all projects will be provided to the Commissioner of Education to ensure transparency and accountability.

- **Community Engagement:** Monthly notifications will be sent to the community via our bureau's website and social media platforms, keeping the public informed of our progress and initiatives.
- **Quarterly PTSA Updates:** In-person updates will be provided to the Parent Teacher Student Association on a quarterly basis, fostering open communication with key stakeholders.
- **Weekly Gubernatorial Briefings:** The Governor will receive weekly updates on our activities and progress, ensuring alignment with broader territorial goals.

These initiatives represent our commitment to creating a more efficient, transparent, and effective school maintenance system. We believe this approach will significantly improve the quality of our educational facilities, contributing to a better learning environment for our students and working conditions for our educators.

At this point, I would like to invite Ms. Chaneel Callwood to provide a concise overview of our New Schools Construction program.

Chaneel Callwood, Architect

Good day, Honorable Marise James, Chairwoman of the Committee on Education and Workforce Development, members of the Committee, other members of the 35th Legislature, other testifiers, and the listening and viewing audiences. Thank you for the opportunity to provide a brief update on the New Schools Program.

The territory schools have received approximately \$3.5 Billion in FEMA investment to replace and/or renovate many of our schools and our team has been working diligently over the last several years to implement this unprecedented program. FEMA has estimated a ten-year timeline for the projects and completed obligation of our funds this year.

This program is not without its challenges, and our team wishes to highlight for the Committee the workflow process required of each project in the territory. The sooner projects are placed out to bid the lower costs will be. Therefore, it is critical that we work together to streamline our processes to enable this program to be successful. It is important to note that design work is needed to obtain FEMA's approval of a proposed project before payments can be made from the obligated funds.

Completed:

- CAHS 9TH Grade Center - Phase 1

Under Construction:

- Abraham Skills Center- Modernization
- CAHS – Demolition
- New Arthur Richards

- New Central HS - (Contract Pending)
- New CAHS (Contract Pending)
- Modernized Boschulte PK-8 (Contract Pending)

Out For Bid Now:

- New Kean HS
- Bowsky PK-8 (Modernization)
- New Oliver PK-8
- Lockhart PK-8 (Addition)
- STT Admin Center at Island Block

Next Out To Bid:

- New Sprauve PK-12 (by Dec. 2024)
- New Henderson PK-8 (by March 2025)
- New Markoe PK-8 (by March 2025)
- New Larsen PK-8 (by March 2025)
- Ed. Complex Modernization (by Dec. 2025)

Our team recently completed the Gladys Abraham Skill Center Phase 1 and Charlotte Amalie High School 9th Grade Academy, located at the former Wheatley site. These facilities provide updated learning spaces for our students.

Arthur Richards Pre-K-8 is currently in construction on St. Croix and is pushing ahead. The next schools to be kicked-off include the St. Croix Administration Center, Edith Williams Academy, Central High School, Bertha C. Boschulte Pre-K-8 and Charlotte Amalie High School.

We are committed to actively supporting and engaging in the ODR Super PMO bundle process, which includes the St. Thomas bundle currently in procurement, the St. John bundle expected to go out for bid by the end of the calendar year, and the St. Croix bundle, which will be open for bidding next year.

We are happy to answer any questions you may have about these plans. Thank you for your time and consideration.

CLOSING STATEMENT

In conclusion, I would like to express my sincere appreciation for your foresight in proposing and enacting USVI Legislative Act 8717. This forward-thinking legislation has made my appearance here today possible. I am fully committed to leading the Bureau of School Construction and Maintenance toward a brighter future for our educational infrastructure.

It's important to note that our efforts are not occurring in isolation. We are working collaboratively with key stakeholders, including the Commissioner of Education and the Office of Disaster Recovery, among others. This collaborative approach ensures that we are aligning our efforts with broader educational and recovery initiatives, producing positive improvements and tangible results for our community.

The Bureau brings into the Bureau's budget from the VIDE General Fund Budget approximately \$4.7 million in personnel and fringe budget for all of the existing Maintenance and Construction staff. I plan to pay the Construction side of the house directly from the School Construction, Maintenance and Capital Fund (SCMC Fund) and have those salaries reimbursed by FEMA directly back into the SCMC Fund. This will free up approximately half of the Bureau's General Fund budget that I will use to hire additional engineers to run maintenance and to hire skilled maintenance technicians. This approach ensures that \$5 million annual appropriation goes to Maintenance.

The task before us is significant, but I am confident that together, we can transform our school facilities into spaces that inspire learning, creativity, and growth. Our children deserve nothing less than our very best efforts, and that is precisely what we intend to deliver.

Thank you once again for your time and attention. We look forward to keeping you updated on our progress and welcome your continued support as we work to enhance the educational infrastructure of the U.S. Virgin Islands.