

**Testimony of Maqueda A. Noorhassan**

**To: Committee on Education and Workforce Development**

**August 15, 2024**

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RE: Committee on Education and Workforce Development Meeting

Attn: Sen. Marise C. James, Esq., Chairperson

3022 Est. Golden Rock

Christiansted, VI 00820

Good day, Honorable Marise C. James, Esq., Chairwoman of the Committee of Education and Workforce Development, Members of this Committee and testifiers. I am Maqueda A. Noorhassan, proud parent and PTA President of RRES. Honorable Marise C. James, thank you for allowing me to testify before you and the members of this committee today to have an open but yet a very important discussion to voice my concerns and opinions about the students, faculty and staff of the Virgin Islands respectfully.

It is established that the VIDE continues to ensure the people of the Virgin Islands that every effort is being made that the children of the territories have a safe and efficient, learning environment and vow to be fully responsible for the functions of timely maintenance, inspection, construction, renovation, repairs and modernization of educational facilities of the VI. But please note, I stood before you Honorable Marise C. James and the committee of Education and Workforce Development on November 16, 2023 to provide testimony based on the lack of transparency to ensure a safe and healthy learning environment for the students,

staff and other administration of the VI, especially on St. Croix. Today, for the record please note that this is part of the very reason why I stand before you today. Recently the VIDE indicated on the VI Consortium that was published on 7/27/2024 at 7:05 am that they intend to “maintain transparency and keep the community informed by sharing videos of the walk-throughs” and will be made publicly on 7/30/2024.” The videos for each school of the VI was posted on the VIDOE YouTube page. But to be honest most videos that I personally viewed was at least 5 minutes and showed mostly the introduction from the DOE Commissioner, Dionne Wells-Hedrington about what to expect in the schools, some input from Mr. Yauncey Milligan, and video of the cafeterias. At that point, I felt as though some of the schools in the territories weren’t ready to reopen.

With all due respect, in my opinion there is a lack of proof of transparency that indicates prior and current problems were addressed. For example, the classrooms, bathrooms, leaking roofs (especially the flood zone schools), gymnasiums and libraries. As to date, no images, air/water quality testing reports and/or mold remediation reports have been released to the public for the SY 2024-2025. If that information is ready and available can the VIDOE please SHARE that vital information? Is there a VIBE School Inspection Report for the school year 2024-2025? With the “key inspection agencies, including the Dept. Of Health, Dept. Of Planning and Natural Resources, Dept. Of Public Works, and Fire and Emergency Medical Services that played a crucial role in the inspections, along with VIBOE, St. Croix Coalition and School PTA representatives”, did everyone come together to submit their findings and collaboratively come to an agreement with pending issues such as kitchen installations, exterior painting, roof repairs for classroom, electrical upgrade, a/c units to be installed, perimeter fencing and camera installations that schools were 100% ready to open safely without any incidents or issues for effective August 5, 2024? I gathered this pending information for each

respected school in the territories, especially St. Croix based on the “VIDE School Maintenance Project Listing for SY 2024-2025. Can someone explain to the people of the VI how with these major pending issues at stake, how school was given the green light to open? Why the date wasn’t push back for all public schools to be open until the dates of completion was met? It is unacceptable and unfortunate that on the first week of school at Eulalie Rivera School, some students were sent home due to an unsafe and non-conducive environment for the students and teachers. What preparations was done prior to this school reopening, if the school was honestly ready there is no way that the students should have been sent home so that “modulars needed maintenance work for mold remediation, HVAC and duct system was isolated and removed, ceiling tiles needed to be replaced, and temporary disruption caused by essential repairs of modulars”. Based on Press released statement from the VIDE. Unacceptable, our students, teachers, faculty and staff deserve better. Is there an explanation as to why this happened at the Eulalie Rivera School? All schools in the VIDE School Maintenance Projects of the St. Croix district has camera installation “in progress” for the SY 2024-2025, these issues was on the School Maintenance Project from since last school year as well. The perimeter fencing for all schools is also “in progress”, is there a deadline for these two issues? How far along until completion? Would these two particular issues be a safety concern if anything arises? Such as someone coming on campus without proper knowledge or consent, or if any violence or bullying occur with or without incident how will any incident be documented as evidence? We need safe schools for ALL.

With the schools also on the VIDE School Maintenance Project Listing such as St. Croix Central High, Claude O. Markoe, Juanita Gardine, and Eulalie Rivera having “kitchen installation in progress” what is the completion date? How are meals being prepared and served? Are there more than one vendor or contractors

assigned to complete this vital role to ensure that our students, faculty and staff have a Healthy and Nutritional meal? Are the schools still being given 5-gallon waters to cook with? If not, how are meals prepared? Based on the VIDE School Maintenance Projects of the St. Croix district for the record, "Exterior Painting" was noticeable for the high schools, St. Croix Central High School, STX Educational Complex and CTEC. When is the expected completion date? Why wasn't this completed during the Summer? Will this work of exterior painting be done after school, on the weekend or on a holiday? Our students deserved better to have a beautiful and uplifting upgrade both for the interior and exterior of school. With all of these issues still affecting the schools of the VI, why did VIDE not make it mandatory to make sure that not some, most, but ALL issues were fixed/resolved and NOT currently in progress, contracting or in solicitation for the SY 2024-2025? Again, why were schools of the VI allowed to be opened on Monday, August 5, 2024 and not extended until the completion of these very important issues that play a key role for accuracy, 100% functioning and conducive learning environment for the students, teachers, faculty and staff? It is unfair that schools are still affected and still having ongoing disruption of learning due to lack of communication, preparation, and transparency to reaffirm the people of the VI that it was and is safe to return to the school campuses. Another major concern for the people of the VI is VIDE financial budgets, planning and execution for spending federal and/or emergency funding where it is established that all monies received is to support our educational system of the VI. Will the VIDE have more transparency on how the funds/monies are being spent or utilized throughout the territory of the Virgin Islands? There are so many things that is current and ongoing that requires attention for funds to be spent/utilize, for example but not limited to office supplies, basic school supplies, cleaning supplies, toiletries, copy paper, ink/toner, drinking water, water to cook, vouchers/stipends to GIVE or REIMBURSE TEACHERS/PARAPROFESSIONALS for purchasing supplies to

fix up the classroom or buying school supplies or reading materials for their students to have a successful school year. Also, in the VIDE budget has there ever been consideration for purchasing items for outdoor structured learning activities, more nutritional food choices/options that is approved by the FDA, updated library books, textbooks, electronic devices, state-of the-art computer labs and playgrounds that will support and enhance learning to ensure that ALL students, teachers, faculty and staff have all of the resources they need to be successful? The people and the children of the Virgin Islands deserve the best that money can buy. The children are our future, teach them well and let them lead the way. It is my plea to you today with the adequate funding to spend and utilize timely to execute and maintain the upkeep of the VI schools/facilities.

I must say, I appreciate and commend the VIDE and going in the right direction to offer new and more opportunities for college/career readiness based on STEM learning, state of the art musical performance hall/curriculum to result in students engaging in their own personal pathways to pursue their passion/goals in life. But, with new plans to demolish and build back schools in the Virgin Islands please do not forget the present issues. A lot of schools already merged and don't have a school to call home. Some classes have transitioned into temporary modular classes, but we need 100% fully functional buildings, (safe and clean) and equipment's and/or electronics such as ceiling fan/tiles, roofs, A/C, vents, to be maintained weekly, monthly, etc. I also commend, the VIDE for their focus on the attendance rate, academic goals, dropout prevention plan and maintain or have an average goal of the I-Ready data to help assist students that needs improvement on their grade level or challenge those students that meet the standards that excel. Thank you, but more work overall needs to be done.

Finally, “Benefits of creating an ideal learning environment creates favorable conditions of learning for students mentally, emotionally, spiritually and physically”. Such conditions can be MOTIVATIONAL, LESS STRESS, FOCUS BETTER and ABSORB KNOWLEDGE. It is a vital role to help and ensure students be in an extraordinary environment that impact their learning! The VIDE keep mentioning that it is their “dedication to delivering a safe and conducive learning environment for all students and is committed to completing all school repairs, from minor fixes to significant projects”, but that is far from happening, far from transparency, far from accountability in my opinion with all due respect. “Safe and conducive learning environment actually helps students focus on academic achievement, maintain high standards, achieve academic goals, fostering positive relationships between staff and students and encourage parental and community involvement”. We can do better, we must do better, including ALL stakeholders that ensure the children of the Virgin Islands have the best possible education, because we are VI Strong, VI resilient. We are definitely all in this together. Because at no time a student or teacher should be punished or reprimanded for doing or saying the right thing. Teachers are a vital part in the lives of our students, it is their oath to serve the children of the Virgin Islands. We need more respect, trust, gratitude and appreciation for our teachers of the VI. We need more transparency and better ongoing communication and a trusting relationship with VIDE. The students of the VI are our Future Leaders, Governors, Senators, Delegate to Congress, Nurses, Doctors, Lawyers, Entrepreneurs and other Community Helpers. They need love, respect and all opportunities to have the best possible education in the Virgin Islands. Because it takes a village to raise a child. We are in this together. With that being said I will leave you with this. P.U.S.H.=Push Until Something Happens. Let us do the right thing everyone.

At this time, I would like to say thank you for once again allowing me to testify before you Honorable Marise C. James and your Committee on Education and Workforce Development on these important issues with the learning environment of the Virgin Islands and I am now available for any questions.

Thank You