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.

On behalf of the Virgin Islands Board of Education, I extend best wishes to students, parents, educators, and the entire Virgin Islands community for the 2024-2025 academic year. My name is Emmanuella Perez-Cassius, Vice Chairperson of the 21st Virgin Islands Board of Education, also known as VIBE or the Board. Joining me is Associate Executive Director Samanta Prentice. Thank you for inviting us to present testimony on the priorities for the 2024-2025 school year and to discuss any concerns as the academic year begins.

INTRODUCTION

According to Title 17, Section 21, the Virgin Islands Board of Education holds the authority to recommend the establishment of public schools, prescribe general regulations, adopt curricula and courses of study, propose laws and amendments, recommend necessary appropriations for school and Department of Education operations, and oversee the establishment, maintenance, and management of public schools in the Virgin Islands.

Act No. 8717 redefined the responsibilities of the Virgin Islands Board of Education regarding preventive and long-term maintenance, as well as oversight of school facilities. The responsibility for assessing public school facilities was transferred to the Bureau of School Construction and Maintenance, while VIBE retained jurisdiction over evaluating and assessing school curricula, instructional practices, and administrative procedures.

PRIORITIES

For the 2024-2025 school year, VIBE's top priorities include:

1. Assessing School Curricula, Instructional Practices, and Administrative Procedures: Starting in September, VIBE's Schools, Plants, and Facilities Committee will facilitate evaluations of curricula, instruction, resources, and support programs. A dedicated team, including Board Members and VIDE's Curricula and Instruction Team, will visit classrooms in both districts from

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.

- September 2024 to November 2024 to assess core standards, grade-level instruction, instructional materials, and practices that directly influence student educational outcomes. A report will be generated with findings and possible solutions for improvement where necessary.
- 2. Increasing Teacher Certification: VIBE remains committed to excellence in education and upholding industry standards. We understand that certification serves not only as a career advancement tool but also as proof of proficiency, encouraging professional development. Teachers with high-quality education provide high-quality instruction to students. In collaboration with the University of the Virgin Islands (UVI) School of Education, VIBE has developed a special certification for UVI teacher education majors. Students within 12-15 credit hours of completing their initial certification degree programs can serve as the instructor of record and earn a beginning teacher's salary while completing their student teaching or final school internship experience. Additionally, certification officers will visit schools in both districts on the 2nd and 4th Friday of each month from September 2024 through May 2025 to assist teachers with the certification process.
- 3. **Health and Safety of Students and Teachers:** Notwithstanding Act No. 8717, the health and safety of students remain a priority, as learning environments are critical to students' academic, emotional, and social success. Research indicates that factors such as risk assessments, facility repairs, maintenance, water treatment, air quality testing, proper waste disposal, and access to nutritional meals are integral to effective teaching and learning.

VIBE plays a crucial role in reviewing and assessing learning environments that impact students' ability to learn and enhance academic and social performance. In collaboration with the Virgin Islands Department of Education (VIDE), School Walkthrough Visits were planned. During these visits, the Board used a school opening readiness checklist to review factors contributing to school preparedness, including health and safety regulations, security and access control, staffing capacity, and facility upgrades. The walkthroughs identified several critical areas requiring immediate attention, including safety concerns, infrastructure repairs, and ongoing maintenance projects. Comments regarding individual schools are noted in the appendix and were shared with the Department and the Bureau of School Construction and Maintenance. However, schools across the Territory share the same concerns.

CONCERNS

The following concerns must be addressed with urgency to ensure a safe and conducive learning environment:

Landscaping: All schools have contracted lawn services, with scheduled grass cutting
before school begins. Contractors must ensure lawns are aesthetically appealing and free
of debris. Trees, leaves, and roots should be cut away from buildings to prevent damage to

guttering systems and sidewalks. Tree cutting contracts should be reviewed, and specific directions provided to stop trees from growing in or near spouts.

- Painting: Most schools received spot painting, but no school was completely repainted.
- Hallways, Walkways, and Stairs: Most spaces appeared lit and clean, but additional lighting is required in all hallways for efficiency and safety.
- **Bathrooms:** Units require maintenance with standard parts for easy change-out and repair. Sanitizing liquid/soap, toilet paper, and paper towels are available in bulk at the warehouse to accommodate all schools. However, not all school bathrooms are stocked.
- Classrooms: Floors are cleaned and buffed. Ceiling tiles were bought in bulk to replace damaged tiles due to consistent leaks. However, issues such as mold, leaks, and inoperable AC units persist in some classrooms.
- **Kitchens:** Several schools across the territory need freezers, though a few in the St. Thomas/St. John District received freezer donations.
- **Recreation:** Several schools are still without gymnasiums. Additionally, play areas need resurfacing to reduce the impact of falls during recess. Soft, durable surfaces should be considered.

These matters require urgent attention. Additionally, the Board acknowledges that several agencies have legal and legislative responsibilities to ensure schools meet statutory requirements. Inspections must include:

- Outlining alternatives for age-appropriate (early childhood, middle school, and high school) learning environments.
- Providing guidance, consultation, and notification for restrictions, non-code compliance, conditions of facilities, environmental factors, and risks.
- Regulatory agencies must orally and in writing indicate marginal practices and factors hindering safe and healthy school operations.

CONCLUSION

We commend all administrators, faculty, staff, students, parents, and the School Plants and Facilities Committee, along with VIBE staff, for their commitment to better education. Your hard work ensures that our students are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and resilience needed to succeed. We encourage continued participation in and support for education at every level—volunteering in schools, joining your respective school PTA, mentoring students and peers, and attending school visits and parent-teacher conferences. Such engagement fosters positive relationships between the administration, teachers, students, families, and the community, leading to increased school morale and pride, improved attendance, higher grades, greater graduation rates, and more productive citizens.

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

APPENDIX

ST. CROIX DISTRICT PUBLIC SCHOOL TOURS

Dates: Tuesday, July 23, 2024, Wednesday, July 24, 2024, Monday, August 12, 2024

ATTENDANCE

Virgin Islands Board of Education:

Emmanuella Perez-Cassius, Vice Chair Terrence T. Joseph, Member Winona A. Hendricks, Chair, School, Plants, & Facilities Committee

Virgin Islands Department of Education:

Dionne Wells-Hedrington, Commissioner Carla Bastin-Knight, Acting Insular Superintendent (Tour Coordinator) Yauncey Milligan, Director of Maintenance - STX Bobby Ferris, Assistant Director of Maintenance - STX Kwame Garcia, Project Manager – New Schools Division Shayla Solomon, Director, Public Relations & Communications

Ancillary Agencies:

Craig Benjamin, Executive Director – Bureau of School Construction and Maintenance Myra Hendricks, Environmental Inspector - Department of Health J-Meka Lindquist, Health Enforcement Officer – Department of Health Kevin Delande, Fire Marshal – Fire Services Archibald Bough, (Title) Department of Health

Parent Teacher Organizations:

Abdul Ali, Parent Representative – Lew Muckle Elementary School Leslie Green, Parent Representative – Claude O. Markoe Elementary School Dawn O'Bryan, Parent Representative – John H. Woodson Junior High School

SCHOOL OBSERVATIONS

Pearl B. Larsen K-8 School

- The playground needs to be demolished.
- The gymnasium should also be demolished due to water seeping under the floors.
- Pre-Kindergarten through 3rd grade students should be restricted from the upper level and use the indoor courts.
- The two outside court areas are subject to standing water and clogs which is grounds for mosquito infestation and breathing mold.
- Floors cleaned and waxed

- PA system functionable
- Main office repaired after fire
- Kitchen satellites food to other schools

VIBE Recommendations

The gym floor and roof issues have gone unresolved for years. This is a recurring problem which needs to be solved and has been noted year after year. The Bureau of School Construction and Maintenance along with engineers need to finally solve problems with a design for an inner play area for Pre-K through 1st graders. The importance of early childhood programs has been supported by certification efforts for teachers. Other play opportunities with developmental and nature exposure need to be reinforced with play equipment.-With the upper playground level subject to be demolished, the gymnasium should also be considered for demolition and reconstruction. In addition to considering advanced age-appropriate play options for this school, the redesign for this site should include:

- a) Covered basketball court
- b) Swimming pool
- c) Soccer or baseball field and
- d) Three (3) instructional classrooms

Juanita Gardine K-8 School

- Leaks near home economics area
- Auditorium Remains without required 60-ton AC for the past three years. 12 fans are used as substitutes.
- Kitchen hood needed type 2, school satellites food to other schools
- Upgraded the faculty lounge
- Lights 221 LED installed (work individually)
- Camera installation ongoing
- Books and materials for class were delivered
- Auditorium has good lighting

Lew Muckle School Elementary School

- Landscaping Grass cutting needed; tree trimming needed for roof integrity
- Kitchen cutting boards needed and will be replaced, screens needed in windows
- Metal railing for the "M" building needed
- Painting in cafeteria
- School scheduled construction for modernization
- Fence line scheduled to be replaced

Ricardo Richards School Elementary School

- Back exterior of building has guttering problems which causes wet surfaces and fall risks during inclement weather
- Cafeteria AC Unit needs cleaning. The area is hot three (3) additional units are needed
- More signage needed for uneven floors

- Fencing a contract has been secured for fencing. However, the school is near the highway and the Board suggests including additional fencing near highways for safety precautions.
- The pothole by entrance is fixed
- Floors are waxed and looks great
- Hallways are well lit
- Old modulars are removed

Alfredo Andrews Elementary School

- Landscaping Grass needs to cut, tree roots need to be addressed to avoid further damage to walkways
- Roofing leaking issues need to be corrected so tiles can be replaced
- Communication and relationship skills need to be addressed between school personnel.
- Kitchen This school is a model site and should be duplicated at other schools with regards to signage and labels for appropriate food stocking, and utensils. However, the milk/food storage cooler needs to be programmed. A 10-ton AC unit was installed. Staff at this location should be commended for the condition of the kitchen.

John H. Woodson Junior High School

- There are still issues with some classrooms (224 A, 225 B, 110, 111, 112) such as mold, leaks, inoperable AC units.
- Sprung Gym needs bathrooms. A bathroom (trailer) from Central will be relocated to provide Boys and Girls bathrooms. The school is in need of additional custodial staff for restrooms.
- Library AC needs to be repaired
- The auditorium stage received floor replacement towards front of stage. There are back areas where repair work needs to be completed
- The music room electrical connectors were not able to be checked.
- Work is being completed in the kitchen.
- Entrance to school has flowerpots with local flowers which is appealing
- Walls are painted

Eulalie Rivera K-8 School

Per conversation with Acting Principal Etta Mitchell and Assistant Principal Dinah Browne, prior to August 5th, modular classrooms were to be deep cleaned based on mold issues which affect students and staff occupancy. The unhealthy environment caused three 6th grade classes and two KG classes to be sent home with instructional packets to be completed. This is a recurring issue in the modulars.

- Classroom doors need strips to help contain cool air (Rooms 103, 104, 105, 106, 107)
- Room 108 condemned
- Room 109 not ready
- Room 112 has a new duct and new AC
- Room 111 has OSHA citation. This is a serious slip and fall hazard
- The iron drain near the cafeteria needs to be replaced.

- The large fan in cafeteria is making a loud noise and needs to be checked. Other fans are partially functional.
- The kitchen needs to be retiled.
- Walkway lights project completed. The hallways are lit.
- Cafeteria tiling completed
- All classrooms were painted

Claude O. Markoe Elementary School Per conversation with Principal Thomas:

- Acquisition and installation of urinals for the boys' bathroom is a work in progress
- All materials for kitchen upgrade are available in the rear of the cafeteria in boxes which prevents the school from expanded use of the cafetorium
- Room 404 has termites and is in need of a screen door, closet door.
- Floor buffed
- The AC is operational, and filters were cleaned
- New tiles were installed in the cafeteria kitchen
- Grass was cut
- Two small playgrounds are available for play
- Cabinets PreK, KG, and 2nd grades need to be checked for termites
- The computer room near the cafeteria has termite tracks and are in need of counters for computers
- Uneven surfaces near Human Service areas are a fall risk
- Gymnasium is closed depriving the Frederiksted area of a gym that was available to the community

St. Croix Central High School

- Bathrooms The boys' and girls' bathrooms are functional, but only one urinal is operable in the boys' bathroom.
- Safety Concerns Exposed network cables must be covered or secured by August 5th. Fire extinguishers are currently out of service but are expected to return by the same date.
- The classrooms on the 1000 wings are non-operable.
- Central's new building contracts are expected to roll out in three phases, beginning with the former gymnasium.
- Painting and Maintenance Ongoing painting is being conducted by contract with a plan to paint three schools yearly on a five-year rotation schedule.
- Air Conditioning and Mold Treatment New A/C units have been installed in the music building, and mold treatment has been completed. The focus is on ensuring comfortable classroom conditions across the district.

St. Croix Educational Complex and Career & Technical Education

- Persistent issues in the kitchen are due to a lack of consistent extermination and gaps in doors that allow rodents to enter.
- There are mold and termite infestation throughout the school

- VIYA internet challenges are expected to increase with the return of more people to the buildings.
- Structural issues were noted in classroom doors and the kitchen.
- The freezer and cold box are non-functional and require surge protectors due to WAPA power surges.
- The bathroom in the band room has been inoperable for over a year and requires deep cleaning.
- Termite and Mold Treatment All wood structures have been removed from classrooms to address termite issues and the presence of wet mold smells.
- Air Quality Improvement A 15% fresh air modernization project is underway in academic and CTEC classrooms.
- Fire Safety Fire extinguishers have been placed in specific classrooms, and external signage in hallways makes them easy to identify.
- Power and Utilities The microgrid provides some generator power. All bathrooms on campus are fully operable.
- Kitchen and Exterminating Issues Ongoing extermination efforts are in place.
- Back door safety remains a concern; however, plans and funding have been identified to replace doors and install video cameras.
- All windows and fans have been installed, but the window operators are not expected to last the entire school year.
- The auditorium, cosmetology classroom, and cooking lab have new A/C units and replaced water piping.

ST. THOMAS/ST. JOHN DISTRICT PUBLIC SCHOOL TOURS

Dates: Thursday, July 25, 2024, and Friday, July 26, 2024

ATTENDANCE

Virgin Islands Board of Education:

Terrence T. Joseph, Member Arah Lockhart, Member Nandi Sekou, Member Winona A. Hendricks, Sandra Bess, Interim Executive Director Linea Powell, Financial Aid Assistant

Virgin Islands Department of Education:

Dionne Wells-Hedrington, Commissioner Stephan Jurgen, Insular Superintendent – St. Thomas/St. John Symra Brown-Gumbs, Deputy Superintendent Gene Weeks, Director of Maintenance St. Thomas/St. John Nilda Bowry, School Nutrition Division Robert Ferrell II, Assistant Director, Public relations

Ancillary Agencies:

Robert Ferrel- Public Works Jermaine Tyson, Planning & Natural Resources Representative - Fire Services

Parent Teacher Organizations:

Mario Turnbull - AFT Representative

Julius E. Sprauve School - At the time of this report, the school visit was not conducted.

SCHOOL OBSERVATIONS

Ivanna Eudora Kean High School

- Down spouts are compromised by tree growth
- Safety and Infrastructure The school requires signage for fire extinguisher placement.
- Eight classrooms have been condemned due to roofing issues near the ROTC area and will be replaced by modular units.
- Bathrooms The average size of today's child requires more comfortable and accessible bathrooms (detrimental for students with disabilities). There is a need for redesign and better accommodations
- Floors need additional buffing to bring out the shine
- School will continue utilizing fruit salad bars
- Groundwork has begun to address roof leakage in the administration and 9th Grade Academy.
- Security Enhancements New cameras are being installed, with completion expected by the end of October 2024.
- The three modular units all have functional A/C systems, and a solicited vendor will treat and coat their roofs.
- Library organized and prepared for opening
- Maintenance and Repairs The 100 wings were painted, 99% of classroom piping was repaired and ceiling tiles were replaced.

Joseph A. Gomez School

- The counselor's suite lacks a fire extinguisher and needs AC.
- All hallways require additional lighting for efficiency and safety.
- Tree overgrowth is currently compromising the integrity of the roof.
- Iguanas are visible on campus. As a safety precaution, the Board suggests soliciting the services of the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Planning & Natural Resources for support with animal control.
- The school's deep cleaning was incomplete at the time of the walkthrough, but the department has verified that all cleaning will be completed before reopening.
- The landscaping company has not been meeting administrative standards (Principal Skelton).

- Some classrooms need door replacement.
- Facilities All bathrooms and kitchen areas are functional.
- Computer lab needs new floor. Surfaces are uneven which poses a safety concern.

Yvonne E. Milliner Bowsky School

- The cafeteria hood and lights are inoperable.
- The doors in the cafeteria and kitchens require flaps to prevent rodent entry.
- Lights in both cafeteria bathrooms are not working.
- Termite trail noticed in upper-level tree.
- Painting in progress
- Office staff were relocated from moldy rooms
- A freezer was donated.
- The Cafeteria AC is working well.
- Sewage treatment and camera installation projects are in progress.
- Five to six A/C units have been repaired or replaced.
- Several buildings on campus are moldy and need to be addressed
- Several classes require the installation of AC units

Bertha C. Boschulte Middle School (BCBMS)

Restrooms - The boys' bathrooms lack doors, drainage issues must be addressed, and urinals overflow during flushing. There are four operable bathrooms on campus.

- No extermination has been done on the rest of the campus.
- Ceiling tiles in certain areas need to be replaced.
- All hallways require additional lighting for efficiency and safety.
- The school is expected to be pressure washed before the August 5th reopening.
- The Gym AC is fixed. The gym restrooms are fully operable
- Cafeteria The roof is completed. All kitchen machinery, except the dishwasher, is functional. Extermination has been completed in the kitchen area. The AC in the cafeteria is operable. The space is clean and ready for operations.
- All classrooms are operable, and a painting contract is pending.
- A/C units have been cleaned over the summer.
- Excellent Career & Technical room with great resources available for teachers. The home economics room has been remodeled and fully equipped.
- Painting occurred in the kitchen manager's office.
- LED lights were installed in walkways.

Ulla F. Muller Elementary School

- Trees need to be cut away from roofs and rooting needs to be addressed (mango tree near KG)
- Fire extinguishers need to be serviced in August 2024.

- The area in the back of the kitchen provides easy access to rats and rodents.
- The grounds are maintained. The school looks good in general.
- AC units are working.
- Tiles were replaced in the KG classroom.
- Bathrooms are clean
- The cafeteria is operable.

Jane E. Tuitt Primary School

Principal T. Bedminster was present during the visit. The school's capacity is 160 - 200 students. The school has two food service workers and serves breakfast and lunch.

- There is a need for storage. The current site for storage showed wet materials and dilapidated structures.
- The passageway to the cafeteria and band area has running water from roof leaks. These areas pose fall risks.
- The 4th grade classroom has no AC
- A KG classroom has been established.

Joseph A. Sibilly Elementary School

- The generator is old and corroded, which poses a safety hazard.
- The cafeteria is very small and has eating shifts to address problems. (The Bureau of School Construction and Maintenance should look at the entrance area directly outside cafeteria to determine, visualize options to increase feeding area).
- Deteriorating buildings at lower school level need considerable review and immediate attention.
- The library has an operable AC.
- An additional KG classroom has been created using a computer room. The computers will be moved to the library which is a small area.
- This school has a donated freezer.

VIBE Recommendations – Bureau of School Construction and Maintenance should also begin to create options and perhaps "an **arboretum**, place where trees, shrubs, and setimes herbaceous plants are <u>cultivated</u> for scientific and educational purposes. An arboretum may be a collection in its own right or a part of a botanical garden."

Charlotte Amalie High School

Principal April Petrus was available for the tour. She shared her concerns. The school has a need for a freezer in kitchen.

- Exterminating services were provided, but additional service is needed at CAHS.
- The school is a walkway and not Used appropriately
- Vacancies have been identified in the areas of English, Math, VI History teacher, Spanish teacher, Nurse, and Custodians.
- The school has NO Gym which is a disservice to students. The area has no AC, no bleachers, inadequate flooring,

- The school has a large kitchen. The school satellites food to other sites.
- Modulars are not in use due to mold. As a result, the Wheatley Skills Center is being explored as an option for additional classrooms.

Lockhart K-8

This school requires a lot of attention. Dr. Jones was available for the tour. This school is a major concern. The school has a large enrollment of approximately 951 students at the end of school year.

- The school kitchen and cafetorium has no AC since October 23, 2023. The area is a health and safety risk.
- The main office and principal's office has no AC
- Grass needs cutting
- The TEAM K site has visible debris and classes with mold conditions
- PE instruction continues to take place in the outside corridors of the school. No clear options have been presented for correcting this matter.
- Old abandon classroom on the way to TEAM K is still standing and poses a safety risk for students and personnel
- Fourteen classrooms required mold remediation. Nine classes are available for use.



School Opening Readiness Maintenance Walkthrough Checklist

School		 Date		
District: STX	STT/STJ			
Participants				
Target areas	I .	Area or Rooms	Comments	
Facilities				
Appearance				
• Landscaping & School grounds				
• Painting				
• Hallways				
• Walkways				
• Stairs				
• Fences				
• Playground -				
Structures &				
Surfaces				
• Restrooms - toilets & basins				
Health & Safety	7			
Regulations				
• Generators				
• Fire				
extinguishers				
• Exit signs				
• Evacuations				
routes				

Security & Access Control		-				
• Alarms						
• Intercom						
• Cameras						
• Security						
checkpoints						
Capacity & staff						
needs for school						
year						
• Teachers						
 Counselors 						
• Administrators						
• Kitchen						
 Custodial 						
• Nurse						
Dusy on tive and Unguade in maintenance						

Preventive and Upgrade in maintenance

- Heat, Ventilation & Air Conditioning
- Plumbing water pipes, drainage, cistern(s)
- Electrical lighting, cooling, heating

Roofs - leaks, damage & drainage, guttering,