

Testimony of the Virgin Islands Board of Education

Before the Committee on Education and Workforce Development
On the Status of Summer Repair and Maintenance Projects and the Readiness of Public
Schools for the 2025–2026 Academic Year

August 29, 2025

Good morning, Chairman and Senator Kurt A. Violet of the 36th Legislature of the Virgin Islands Committee on Education and Workforce Development, other esteemed members of the Committee, legislative staff, fellow stakeholders, and the listening and viewing audiences. I am Vice-Chair Emmanuella Perez-Cassius providing testimony on behalf of Dr. Kyza A. Callwood, Chairman of the Virgin Islands Board of Education, and members. Today, I am accompanied by Winona A. Hendricks who chairs the board's Curriculum, Instruction and Learning Environment committee.

I thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the status of summer repair and maintenance projects, and the overall readiness of our schools which were opened Wednesday, August 13, 2025, for the 2025–2026 academic year.

Introductory Remarks

The Bureau of School Construction and Maintenance (BCSM) carries the important responsibility of managing all aspects of our public educational facilities, from construction and modernization to repairs and upkeep. Operating independently under the Office of the Governor, BCSM was given new responsibilities through the enactment of Act No. 8717. This Act shifted certain oversight functions such as reporting on school readiness, coordinating with environmental and safety agencies, and certifying school openings away from the Virgin Islands Board of Education (VIBE). As a result, the Board's role is now focused on its general statutory authority over school matters, including its responsibility to make recommendations under 17 V.I.C. § 21.

For the Board to fulfill its role effectively, it relies on accurate and timely information from both BCSM and the Virgin Islands Department of Education (VIDE). A spirit of coordination, collaboration, and open communication among these agencies is essential for maintaining accountability and transparency in the school readiness process. At present, however, the law does not require BCSM or VIDE to share this information with the Board. This absence of clear reporting obligations can unintentionally create gaps that make it harder for everyone to work in unison toward the same goal.

It is important to note that there is currently no independent oversight mechanism outside of legislative action to ensure that school repair and modernization projects remain on schedule or that challenges are consistently reported and addressed. While Board members may serve on master planning committees, this does not substitute for independent oversight and consistent updates. To close this gap, it would be beneficial to establish structured reporting requirements and defined coordination practices that allow all parties to stay aligned, informed, and accountable.

This summer's repair efforts illustrate how better collaboration could help us overcome obstacles. As BCSM Executive Director Craig Benjamin explained, financial constraints and vendor payment delays made it difficult to keep certain projects on schedule, requiring work

to extend into the school year during evenings, weekends, and holidays. These realities underscore the importance of clear communication and shared problem-solving.

Similarly, challenges arose during the July 31st–August 4th walkthroughs, when delays by some agencies disrupted the BCSM’s schedule. The Board also did not receive BCSM’s full project list in advance, making it harder to track issues, monitor progress, and recognize accomplishments. Responses to completion date inquiries were often general (“before school starts,” “in a few days,” “the contractor is on site”), which understandably caused frustration given the August 13th reopening. If the Board had retained direct statutory oversight of physical plant readiness, these matters could have been incorporated into its annual June 15th report to the Legislature, providing timely visibility into project status and school readiness.

Still, the focus moving forward should not be on where responsibilities lie, but rather on how we can collectively strengthen our partnerships, create systems that foster accountability, and ensure that every student has a safe and fully prepared learning environment on opening day. By working together with clarity and mutual respect, we can transform these challenges into opportunities for stronger schools and a stronger Virgin Islands.

District Findings

While the Board’s statutory authority over physical school facilities is limited, in practice, VIBE serves as the eyes and ears on the ground, monitoring and documenting conditions that would not ordinarily be required to be reported to the Legislature under the current legal framework. The following findings illustrate the ongoing challenges affecting school safety, health, and operational readiness.

Note: All facilities have ongoing concerns that need to be addressed. While specific examples were highlighted, these examples do not represent the full scope of issues, and many additional safety, health, and operational matters remain unlisted.

St. Croix District (STX) – School Concerns

- **John H. Woodson Jr. High** – Severe mold throughout sections of the building; roof leaks; remediation requires 2–3 weeks. Staff and students have already reported health impacts.
- **Lew Muckle Elementary** – Inadequate safety signage; partial ramp access; leaking roofs; deplorable restroom conditions.
- **Claude O. Markoe (COMS)** – Playground installation incomplete; surfacing and cleaning needed; pump determination pending.
- **Arthur Richards K-8** – Hazardous runoff, auditorium relocation need, drainage issues.
- **St. Croix Central High** – Roof leaks, modular classrooms with mold, cafeteria leaks, spalling concrete at Music building.
- **St. Croix Educational Complex** – Corroded kitchen equipment, pending grease trap, unsafe arts classrooms.
- **Career & Technical Education Center (CTEC)** – Lacks compliant emergency eye/body wash stations, ventilation issues, missing ceiling tiles.
- **Eulalie Rivera** – Modular roof and restroom repairs needed; wastewater pump requires attention.

- **Alternative** – Cafeteria upgrades are desperately needed; fencing need repair; a dedicated recreational area is needed for students.
- **Juanita Gardine** – Auditorium AC is down due to scheduled electrical upgrades; Drain cover needed in the kitchen; Windows and Screens needs to be addressed; Hazardous breakage of wall and roofing near gym; Special Education building need renovation and much-needed upgrades; underground leak on field area affects bathrooms.

St. Croix District – Accomplishments

- **Pearle B. Larsen Elementary** – Roof repairs completed, interior lighting replaced, custodial team praised for upkeep.
- **Lew Muckle** – Basketball court refurbished.
- **Arthur Richards** – Deep cleaning, restroom upgrades, roof recoated.
- **COMS** – Restroom upgrades, AC servicing, deep cleaning.
- **CTEC** – Electrical upgrades; installation of benches and railings.
- **Central High** – Walkway painted, ROTC room refurbished, Music room carpet removed, construction for new school scheduled for 2025.
- **Educational Complex** – Gym AC installed, electrical upgrades, deep cleaning.

St. Thomas / St. John District (STT–STJ) – School Concerns

- **Joseph Sibilly** – Roofing issues; K–g fire system and smoke alarm placement concerns.
- **Ulla Muller** – Kitchen panel box uncovered; freezer push release missing; faucet leaks.
- **Yvonne Milliner-Bowsky** – Visit incomplete due to travel; noted bathroom repairs and deep cleaning.
- **Jane E. Tuitt** – Roof leaks near cafeteria; abandoned cars nearby; recommendation for relocation.
- **CAHS** – Off-gassing in classrooms; mold cleaning cycles; contractors working on Special Ed building.
- **Lockhart** – Repairs needed in assistant principal’s bathroom; grease trap pending; inadequate PE staff space.
- **Edith Williams** – Roof repairs, bathroom plumbing, and mold remediation needed; relocation recommended due to safety concerns.
- **Sprauve** – Decking incomplete; open areas under buildings pose risks; bathroom and railing issues.
- **Charlotte Amalie HS** – Mold remediation cycles, kitchen hood leaks unresolved, Imprest funds delayed.
- **Bertha C. Boschulte** – Six AC units malfunctioning; roof leaks; unsafe damaged tile fell on principal; vending machines competing with child nutrition program.
- **Gladys Gomez** – No maintenance staff or groundskeeper; mold remediation needed; kitchen lock unsafe.
- **Ivanna Eudora Kean** – Cafeteria kitchen hood leaks unresolved; inadequate Special Ed rooms; accreditation funding not available.
- **Yvonne E. Milliner Bowsky** – Some classrooms have mold; some ACs are down; painting needed throughout the campus.

St. Thomas / St. John District – Accomplishments

- **Joseph Sibilly** – Contractor repairing bathrooms.
- **Ulla Muller** – Electrical upgrades in kitchen.

- **Jane E. Tuitt** – Classroom refurbished with new cabinets and ceiling repairs.
- **CAHS** – Sprung area AC installed; deck sanded and painted.
- **Lockhart** – New canopies; freshly painted PE corridor.
- **Edith Williams** – Cafeteria room identified; new principal assigned.
- **Julius E. Sprauve** – Generator installed; electrical upgrades to kitchen; cafeteria ceiling fixed.
- **Ivanna Eudora Kean** – New cafeteria AC; ROTC area sheltered; Home Economics refurbished; preparation underway for new building.
- **Bertha C. Boschulte** – Dishwasher installed; auditorium AC units cleaned and repaired.
- **Joseph Gomez** – Kitchen AC repaired; roof repairs underway.
- **Yvonne E. Milliner Bowsky** – Protective padding in Special Ed classrooms; deep cleaning completed in some areas.

Auxiliary Agency Observations

Inspections from Fire Services, Health, Child Nutrition, School Safety, and DPNR highlighted persistent hazards:

- Fire extinguishers overdue for service; smoke detectors outdated or absent.
- Gas and propane tanks not properly enclosed.
- Bathrooms lack vomit kits; custodial procedures risk cross-contamination.
- Science labs with improperly stored corrosive materials.
- Open crawl spaces beneath buildings creating hazards.
- Kitchen equipment improperly stored, increasing pest risk.

Auxiliary agencies should share full reports with VIDE, VIBE, and BSCM, with authority to issue warnings or sanctions for serious safety violations.

Recommendations

For BCSM and VIDE

1. Provide advance project lists to VIBE prior to walkthroughs.
2. Require New Schools representatives to participate in walkthroughs.
3. Establish written responsibilities and accountability systems for school-based maintenance workers.
4. Conduct pre-school orientation with district workers on the maintenance plan and expectations.
5. Formalize routine inspections with bi-weekly reports to supervisors.
6. Address staff shortages and succession planning (e.g., district's only AC technician nearing retirement).
7. Explore supplemental funding (e.g., Diageo or Lottery funds) for urgent projects.
8. Increase salaries and training opportunities for maintenance staff to match the scope of responsibilities.

For the Virgin Islands Board of Education (VIBE)

- Strongly recommend temporary closure of John H. Woodson Jr. High School for full remediation, with virtual instruction beginning August 13, 2025, and physical reopening September 2, 2025.
- Oppose the use of double sessions as a regressive option.
- Recommend relocation of Edith Williams School due to ongoing environmental and safety concerns.
- Request clarity on the monitor-to-student ratio policy, as several schools fail to meet the 1:100 benchmark.
- Support enhanced safety measures: training for crisis response, defibrillator packs, personal protective equipment, and proper hazardous materials management.

School Readiness Examples

As an example, a three-stage readiness framework could be outlined as follows:

- **Readiness (70–79%)** – Projects are ongoing but hindered by delays or missing parts.
- **Advance Preparation (80–89%)** – Contracts are in place, projects are nearing completion, and deadlines are reliable.
- **School Open Secure (90–100%)** – Projects are completed, inspected, documented, and approved.

For further illustration, a different approach could be a **color-coded readiness model**:

- **Red (Needs Attention)** – Critical delays or missing elements that may impact opening.
- **Yellow (Progressing)** – Projects substantially underway with minor risks to timeline.
- **Green (Ready)** – All requirements met, projects completed, and schools cleared for safe opening.

Whatever example or process is developed by BSCM in collaborations with VIDE and VIBE, it will provide all stakeholders with a clear tool to guide and support informed decision-making.

Conclusion

The Virgin Islands Board of Education acknowledges the extraordinary efforts of BSCM, VIDE, and our partner agencies to confront complex facility challenges under immense financial and logistical constraints. Yet, no matter the challenges, the moral imperative remains clear: the health and safety of our children cannot be compromised. Persistent issues such as mold, crumbling infrastructure, and neglected maintenance are not mere inconveniences, they are threats to the dignity, well-being, and fundamental right of every Virgin Islands child to a safe and supportive education.

The Board affirms that providing safe and healthy schools is not optional, nor is it negotiable. It is a legal responsibility, a moral duty, and a promise to every parent who entrusts us with their child's future. We must move beyond temporary fixes and embrace decisive, transparent, and lasting solutions. Anything less is a failure of our collective responsibility.

We remain steadfast in our commitment to partner with the Legislature, VIDE, BCSM, and all stakeholders to ensure that when the 2025–2026 academic year begins, no child in the Virgin Islands enters a classroom that endangers their health or undermines their ability to learn. Safe schools are not a privilege, they are a right.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I stand ready to answer any questions or provide further clarification.