COMMITTEE OF EDUCATION AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT TESTIMONY

MARCH 25,2026

36th LEGISLATURE OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

COMMITTEE ON EDCUCATION AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT TESTIMONY

PRESENTED BY CRAIG BENJAMIN,
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR BUREAU OF SCHOOL
CONSTRUCTION AND MAINTENANCE

EARL B. OTTLEY LEGISLATIVE
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Good morning, Honorable Kurt Vialet, Chairman of the Committee on Education and Workforce Development; Honorable Avery Lewis, Vice Chairman; members of the Committee; other members of the 36th Legislature; fellow testifiers; and members of the listening and viewing audience.

My name is Craig Benjamin, and I serve as the Executive Director of the Bureau of School Construction and Maintenance. I am pleased to provide testimony today regarding the proposed redistricting plan for the 2026–2027 school year, including its potential impacts on the John H. Woodson Jr. High School and Eulalie Rivera Elementary School communities.

Introduction and Department Position

The Bureau of School Construction and Maintenance maintains that redistricting can be successfully implemented if facility readiness, student capacity, and health and safety standards are thoroughly addressed in advance. While the proposed changes present opportunities to enhance educational delivery and optimize the use of both new and existing facilities, they also introduce operational and infrastructure challenges that must be carefully planned for and effectively managed.

The new Arthur Richards school will incorporate advanced technology, providing BSCM maintenance staff with the opportunity to receive specialized training required to properly maintain the facility. For example, the BSCM team responsible for the upkeep of mechanical, electrical, plumbing, and HVAC systems has already begun introductory training on the specialized equipment installed as part of the commissioning process.

However, there remains a need for the Bureau to expand its workforce to ensure it can effectively maintain the Arthur Richards facility once it is turned over, while also continuing to support the maintenance needs of existing schools. For example, the new Arthur Richards campus includes a swimming pool, which will require a qualified pool technician to oversee water quality, chemical balancing, filtration systems, and routine maintenance.

In addition to a pool technician, the Bureau will need personnel such as a maintenance mechanic or facilities technician trained in pump and filtration systems, a custodian for daily cleaning and sanitation of the pool area, and an onsite electrician or HVAC technician to support any related mechanical and environmental control systems. Depending on usage and regulatory requirements, certified lifeguard support or safety personnel may also be necessary to ensure compliance with safety standards.

Receiving only $3 million to maintain existing schools this fiscal year has been challenging, as it requires prioritizing critical needs and limiting the scope of maintenance activities. Currently, most of our available funds are directed toward emergency repairs.

To effectively implement preventive maintenance at the new Arthur Richards facility once it becomes operational, while continuing to maintain existing schools, an increase in annual funding will be necessary. As an initial step, the Bureau of School Construction and Maintenance Capital Fund should be increased to at least $5,000,000, in accordance with Act 8717.

The reduction in the number of buildings included in the original design of the new Arthur Richards facility has resulted in a corresponding decrease in overall classroom capacity. As a result, the school is no longer able to accommodate the full student population initially anticipated within a single campus.

Consequently, this limitation has required the consideration and implementation of alternative strategies, including the utilization of vacated or underused school campuses to accommodate displaced students. In addition, proposed redistricting measures have become necessary to more evenly distribute student enrollment across available facilities. These actions are intended to ensure that all students are placed in appropriate learning environments while maximizing the use of existing infrastructure and maintaining compliance with capacity, safety, and educational standards.

The Bureau remains available to support upcoming relocations and to carry out any necessary site adjustments to ensure a smooth and efficient transition.

Role of BSCM in Approval and Oversight

The Bureau of School Construction and Maintenance (BSCM)’s primary role is to ensure that all school facilities meet established standards for health, safety, and operational adequacy. This responsibility encompasses the inspection, maintenance, and oversight of critical building systems, including mechanical, electrical, plumbing, and HVAC infrastructure, as well as structural integrity, fire and life safety systems, and environmental health conditions. It also includes ensuring compliance with applicable local and federal regulations, such as occupancy limits, sanitation standards, and accessibility requirements under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

In practical terms, BSCM utilizes the International Building codes to evaluate factors such as classroom capacity and assess the overall condition of facilities determining their readiness to support student populations. We aim to provide preventive maintenance to reduce long-term costs and system failures; however, limited funding frequently shifts our focus toward reactive or emergency repairs, straining resources and impacting long-term facility upkeep.

Although BSCM is not responsible for the approval of redistricting plans, the Bureau plays a critical advisory role by providing detailed facility assessments and technical data to inform decision-making. This includes identifying which campuses can safely accommodate increased

enrollment, estimating the costs and timelines associated with necessary upgrades, and highlighting potential risks related to overcrowding or infrastructure limitations.

In addition, BSCM supports the implementation of redistricting initiatives by preparing facilities for occupancy. This involves coordinating repairs and renovations, ensuring that all building

systems are fully operational, reconfiguring spaces to meet instructional needs, and developing maintenance plans to sustain facility performance over time. The Bureau also assists with logistical planning and interdepartmental coordination to help ensure that transitions are executed efficiently and with minimal disruption to students, faculty, and staff.

Current Facility Conditions

John H. Woodson Jr. High School
A walkthrough conducted by the Bureau's maintenance team confirmed that the Woodson campus is fully operational, with only minor routine maintenance needs. The school includes approximately 52 classrooms and serves 442 seventh and eighth grade students. All major systems—including HVAC, electrical, plumbing, and roofing—are functional, and recent roof repairs have been completed.

Last week's walkthroughs confirmed that previously damp grassy areas and walls—once affected by persistent leaks and covered with moss—have significantly dried out. Indoor air quality has also notably improved because of deep cleaning the air conditioning units, along with repairs to the roofing system, wall extensions, and ceilings.

Although some visible exterior wall cracks caused by prior water intrusion remain, they do not currently pose any structural concerns. The Bureau will continue to monitor these conditions and plans to address the repairs should any significant deterioration occur during occupancy.

At the beginning of the current school year, more than $5 million was invested in comprehensive mold remediation and roof repairs at the Woodson campus. As a result of these efforts, overall air quality has improved significantly.

The Bureau of School Construction and Maintenance has implemented routine quality cleaning protocols and will continue to conduct enhanced cleanings on a regular basis, including monthly deep cleaning as needed, to ensure that indoor environmental conditions remain safe and conducive to learning.

The campus is well-equipped, featuring a library, gymnasium, auditorium, cafeteria, full kitchen, special education classrooms, and other instructional and support spaces. Five additional

classrooms are available, although two have identified air quality concerns that will continue to be monitored and addressed.

Eulalie Rivera Elementary School
Recent facility assessments confirm that major infrastructure improvements have been completed, including a full electrical system upgrade, installation of a backup generator, enhanced perimeter fencing, and a fully operational security camera system. HVAC improvements and general repairs have also enhanced classroom conditions.

Other noted improvements to the Eulalie Rivera Elementary school campus include the installation of A/C units in the classrooms and offices and several other plumbing and general repairs completed as needed. These repairs have improved classroom comfortability and ensure the school remains complaint with relative educational regulations.

However, several critical issues remain, particularly related to roofing, interior environmental conditions, and operational functionality.

Deferred Maintenance and Facility Assessments

Recent inspections have identified both completed improvements and outstanding maintenance needs:

- Roof leaks at Eulalie Rivera Elementary are scheduled for repair during the upcoming summer period.
- The modular main office structure at Eulalie Rivera has deteriorated due to deferred maintenance and require replacement.
- Two classrooms at Woodson have air quality issues that require further evaluation and remediation.

Indoor Environmental Conditions

Indoor environmental quality remains a priority across all campuses.

- Mold has been identified in the Eulalie Rivera library and requires immediate remediation.
- Ventilation and humidity control improvements have been implemented in several areas; however, continued monitoring is necessary.
- At Woodson, identified air quality concerns in select classrooms must be addressed prior to reassignment or increased occupancy.

BSCM is actively coordinating remediation efforts to ensure safe and healthy learning environments for students and staff.

Capacity and Adequacy of Receiving Schools

Woodson Campus
The campus is currently operating within capacity and includes a range of specialized spaces such as a gymnasium, auditorium, cafeteria, and program-specific classrooms. However, available surplus space is limited, and any increase in enrollment will require careful scheduling and potential reconfiguration of existing spaces.

Eulalie Rivera Campus
The campus lacks several key facilities required for expanded or transitional use, including:

- Dedicated science laboratory space
- A full auditorium or multipurpose assembly space
- Adequately sized cafeteria facilities

These limitations impact both instructional delivery and the ability to accommodate additional students effectively. This circumstance results in a staggered lunch period for students.

Required Repairs, Upgrades, and Capital Improvements

Before additional students can be accommodated at the Eulalie Campus, the following improvements are required:

Eulalie Rivera Elementary School

- Mold remediation in the library (Mold assessment was completed. Mold remediation will be completed shortly).
- Completion of roof repairs (completion is scheduled for this summer).
- Full restoration and equipping of the kitchen (including acquisition of essential appliances)
- Replacement of the modular main office structure
- Installation of an intercom system
- Expansion or operational adjustment of cafeteria space
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- Need for laboratories for chemistry etc. and gymnasium (moving Sprung or purchasing and erecting a new sprung)

Systemwide / Receiving Impacts

- Evaluation of classroom capacity and potential construction of additional classrooms where needed
- Development of age-appropriate facilities, including restrooms and recreational areas for transitioning student populations

While detailed cost estimates and funding allocations are still under development, these improvements will require a combination of local and federal funding sources, along with clearly defined project timelines.

Overall Readiness for 2026–2027 School Year

At present, existing campuses can support their current student populations. However, full readiness for redistricting depends on the timely completion of critical repairs and upgrades.

Construction and renovation timelines present a significant risk. Design, procurement, and permitting processes may extend beyond the summer window, increasing the likelihood of delays. Without timely execution, some facilities may not be fully prepared to accommodate additional students at the start of the school year.

Maintenance Capacity

BSCM has made incremental progress in increasing maintenance staffing; however, there remains a shortage of specialized technical personnel. As a result, the Bureau continues to rely on contractors for certain systems and repairs.

Plans are in place to:

- Expand workforce capacity
- Provide specialized training and certifications
- Recruit skilled technicians to support complex building systems

Sustained investment in maintenance resources will be essential to support increased facility demands under redistricting.

Alignment with Long-Term Facilities Planning

All current and proposed improvements must align with the Territory's new school facilities and modernization plan, which prioritizes the strategic use of available funding while ensuring compliance with applicable federal and local requirements. Currently, many campuses, including Eulalie Rivera Elementary School, are largely limited to repair-focused projects due to restrictions associated with federal funding allocated for new school construction.

As a result, the scope of work at existing campuses is constrained in the following ways:

- Major new construction or expansion projects at existing school sites are generally restricted under current funding guidelines.
- Improvements are primarily limited to repairs, maintenance, and minor upgrades necessary to ensure health, safety, and operational functionality.
- Opportunities to significantly increase capacity or modernize aging infrastructure are limited without identifying alternative funding sources.

The Eulalie campus currently lacks a dedicated science laboratory, auditorium, or multipurpose area to support school initiatives for a middle school student body. These limitations affect both academic programming and school community engagement, and an increase in student enrollment would further exacerbate these challenges. Additionally, the federal funds currently available are designated for specific replacement projects and cannot be easily redirected toward major capital improvements at existing facilities.

The campus also lacks a gymnasium, which limits opportunities for athletic programs and extracurricular development. In the short term, the Department of Education would need to provide transportation to nearby facilities, requiring additional funding. Constructing a new Sprung facility, like those at Woodson and Central, is estimated to cost approximately $6 million.

According to the International Building Code (IBC) and related studies, the average classroom size for elementary and middle schools is approximately 900 square feet. This typically allows 20–30 square feet per student; however, overall campus requirements—such as circulation, common areas, and support spaces—often necessitate additional square footage per student to maintain safe and functional learning environments.

Given these findings, the Bureau of School Construction and Maintenance (BSCM) request the allocation of resources to address the most urgent needs, including:

- Environmental remediation to address water intrusion and related hazards
- Completion of kitchen restoration
- Ongoing roof repairs

Additional support is requested for planning and funding:

- Replacement of the main office
- Installation of a campus-wide intercom system
- Evaluation and upgrades to cafeteria facilities

For long-term planning, the BSCM recommends consideration of capital improvements to provide adequate instructional and assembly spaces, ensuring that the campus can safely and effectively support both current and future student populations.

Recommended Funding Priorities

Given these findings, the Bureau of School Construction and Maintenance (BSCM) request the allocation of resources to address the most urgent needs and to support long-term facility improvements.

Priority	Project / Need	Description	Estimated Cost	Notes
1	Environmental Remediation	Address water intrusion, mold, and other environmental hazards	$2–3M	Critical for health and safety
2	Roof Repairs	Complete ongoing roof repair projects	$1–2M	Prevent further water damage and structural deterioration
3	Kitchen Restoration	Complete kitchen renovation and upgrades	$500K–$1M	Essential for food service operations
4	Main Office Replacement	Rebuild or upgrade administrative spaces	$1–2M	Supports school operations and security
5	Intercom System Installation	Install or upgrade campus-wide communication system	$250K–$500K	Enhances safety and operational efficiency
6	Cafeteria Evaluation & Upgrades	Assess capacity and functionality; address deficiencies	$500K–$1M	Supports student nutrition and community programs

Priority	Project / Need	Description	Estimated Cost	Notes
7	Gymnasium / Sprung Facility	Provide indoor athletic and assembly space	$6M	Long-term investment for athletics and extracurricular programs
8	Instructional & Assembly Spaces	Plan for additional classrooms or multipurpose areas	TBD	Long-term capital planning for future growth

Conclusion

BSCM s prepared to provide services in support of the goals for the proposed redistricting plan but emphasizes that successful implementation depends on addressing critical facility needs.

Immediate priorities include:

- Environmental remediation
- Roof repairs
- Kitchen restoration

Additional funds are needed to improve operational functionality, expand capacity, and ensure long-term sustainability.

BSCM remains committed to supporting the Department of Education in ensuring that all facilities are safe, functional, and capable of delivering high-quality educational environments for all students.