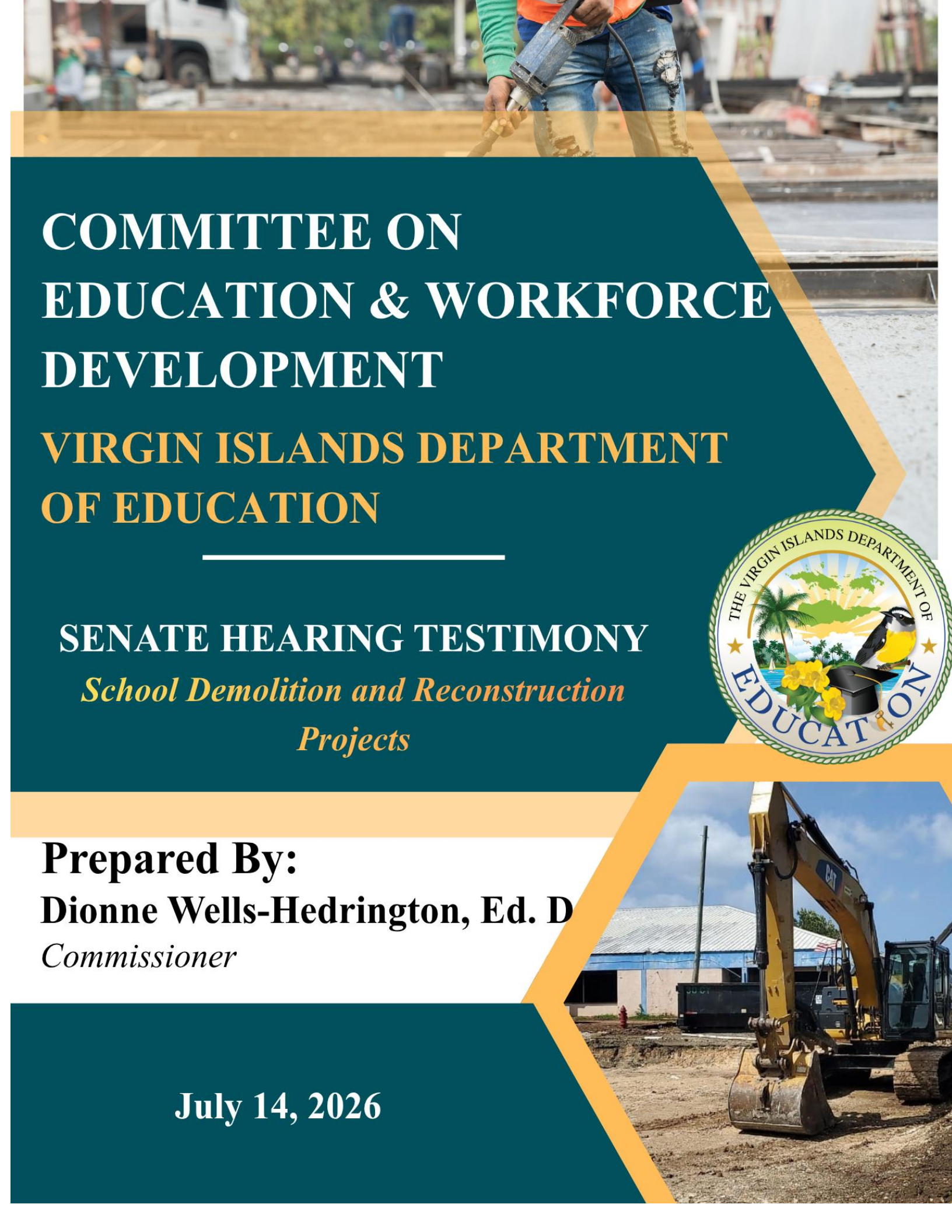


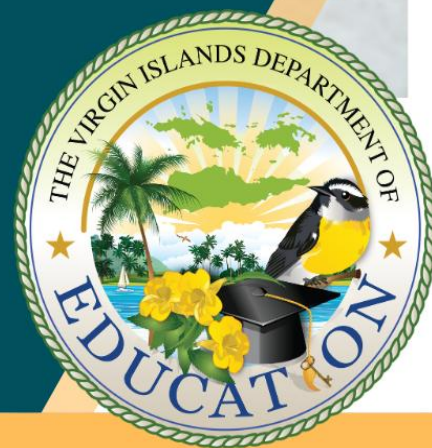


COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION & WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

VIRGIN ISLANDS DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

SENATE HEARING TESTIMONY

School Demolition and Reconstruction Projects



Prepared By:
Dionne Wells-Hedrington, Ed. D
Commissioner

July 14, 2026



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Commissioner

GOVERNMENT OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS
DEPARTMENT OF
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July 7, 2026

Honorable Kurt Violet, Chairman
Committee on Education and Workforce Development
Capitol Building
Post Office Box 1690
St. Thomas, Virgin Islands 00804

Sent electronically via kviolet@legvi.org

Dear Senator Kurt Violet,

Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony before the Committee on Education and Workforce Development regarding school demolition and reconstruction updates.

Enclosed for your review is the Department's comprehensive handbook, which includes detailed testimony and supporting documentation. I sincerely appreciate your continued support and commitment to addressing the evolving needs of the Virgin Islands Department of Education and the students we serve.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Dionne Wells-Hedrington".

Dionne Wells-Hedrington, Ed.D.
Commissioner

Table of Contents

Introduction	4
<i>Commissioner's Statement.....</i>	<i>4</i>
School Demolition & Reconstruction Projects	Error! Bookmark not defined.
New Arthur A. Richards PreK-8	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Charlotte Amalie High School.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Bertha C. Boschulte PreK-8	9
New Julius E. Sprauve PreK-12.....	9
New Central High School	9
St. Croix Educational Complex- Modernization	9
Bundled Schools on St. Thomas and St. Croix	10
Conclusion.....	14

Introduction

Commissioner's Statement

Good morning, Chairman Senator Kurt A. Violet, Vice Chair Senator Avery L Lewis; other committee members, Senator Marise C. James, Senator Dwayne M. DeGraff, Senator Franklin D. Johnson, Senator Kenneth L. Gittins and Senator Carla J. Joseph; other members of the 36th legislature; listening and viewing audience,

I am Dr. Dionne Wells-Hedrington, privileged to serve as the Commissioner for the Virgin Islands Department of Education. Thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony on the status update regarding school demolition and reconstruction projects.

Joining me today from my team:

- Ms. Chaneel Callwood, Architect
- Mr. Yauncey Milligan, Project Manager

Additional VIDE personnel are on standby to provide detailed insights into specific areas if needed. Again, thank you for your unwavering support and the opportunity to testify today.

School Demolition & Reconstruction Projects

The Virgin Islands Department of Education is making unprecedented strides in transforming the Territory's public-school infrastructure through a comprehensive portfolio of 22 active capital projects currently in various stages of design and construction. With the unwavering support of Governor Albert Bryan Jr., the Virgin Islands Legislature, our federal partners, and the Office of Disaster Recovery, we are rebuilding schools that will serve as modern, safe, resilient, and student-centered learning environments for generations to come. These projects are not simply construction initiatives, they are strategic investments in educational excellence, student achievement, and the future of the Virgin Islands.

We recognize that the community is eager to see these projects move as quickly as possible. However, every project funded through the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) must undergo a rigorous approval process that includes environmental and historic preservation reviews` (EHP), engineering and architectural design, cost validation, and multiple federal compliance requirements before construction can begin. While this process requires patience, it provides the accountability necessary to ensure responsible stewardship of public funds and guarantees that our schools are rebuilt to the highest standards of safety, resilience, and sustainability.

Despite these complexities, the Department remains steadfast in its commitment to maintaining momentum, strengthening collaboration with our federal and local partners, and advancing each project toward completion. Every milestone achieved represents meaningful progress toward delivering the world-class educational facilities that our students, educators, families, and communities deserve. We remain focused on ensuring that every dollar invested translates into lasting improvements that will enhance student

outcomes, support exceptional teaching and learning, and position the Virgin Islands' public education system for continued success.

After the devastation caused by Hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017, we immediately set out to focus on and tenaciously support:

1. The empowerment of VIDE (agency) leadership to emphasize a balance of aspiration and facilities that would be designed and built to provide long term benefits to our children, teachers, parents and the greater USVI communities.
2. A demand for the accountability of all consultant and design-build teams to deliver to VIDE a portfolio of projects that prioritizes construction goals in a quality, time driven, transparent way that includes strong local participation.
3. “Raising the bar” on teaching and learning through the implementation of architecture, furniture and technology to enable and connect flexible and adaptable campuses that support and connect our school communities both locally and globally.

The timely review of the Bi-Partisan Budget Process (BBP) led to the development of milestones that resulted in an unprecedented approach to the “prudent replacement of our schools as per industry standards”.

Overview of Milestones facilitated through FEMA funding:

FEMA School Reconstruction Process and Major Milestones

The reconstruction and modernization of the Virgin Islands public school system represent one of the largest public infrastructure investments in the history of our Territory. Following the devastation caused by Hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017, the Department of Education committed to not simply rebuilding schools, but reimagining learning environments that would serve generations of Virgin Islands students. This effort has been guided by three overarching priorities:

- Developing modern, resilient, student-centered educational facilities that support teaching and learning for decades to come.
- Maintaining accountability and transparency throughout the design and construction process while maximizing local participation; and
- Creating innovative learning environments equipped with advanced technology, flexible instructional spaces, and infrastructure that prepares students for success in an increasingly global economy.

This transformation has required extensive coordination with FEMA, federal and territorial agencies, architects, engineers, environmental regulators, and community stakeholders. The process has unfolded through several critical phases.

Emergency Recovery and Vision Development (2017–2020)

Immediately following the hurricanes, the Department focused on stabilizing school operations through emergency repairs and temporary modular classrooms while simultaneously developing a long-term educational facilities vision. During this period, the Department established a comprehensive Master Plan that reimagined the public school footprint, including strategic campus consolidations and modernization priorities aligned with educational programming and community needs.

Funding Validation and Project Development (2020–2023)

The next phase focused on securing FEMA funding and defining the scope of each project. More than 45 school properties were evaluated to determine whether repair or replacement represented the most prudent investment of federal resources. The Department developed comprehensive bridging documents that established industry standards and served as the technical foundation for project funding.

These efforts culminated in FEMA's approval of approximately \$3.68 billion in funding in November 2023—one of the largest educational recovery investments ever awarded in the Territory. During this same period, enabling projects such as the Wheatley Skill Center and the Ninth Grade Center were completed to support phased construction, and procurement began for several major school replacement projects.

Design-Build Implementation (2023–2026)

With funding secured, the Department transitioned into full implementation by procuring Design-Build teams for the remaining projects within the portfolio. Significant progress has included:

- Construction of the new Arthur A. Richards PreK-8 School, scheduled to open in August 2026;
- Completion of the Territory-wide Preliminary Environmental Assessment, clearing an important regulatory milestone;
- Processing of FEMA Record of Environmental Consideration (REC) approvals necessary to authorize construction; and
- Advancement of design and construction documents for ten major school projects, including Charlotte Amalie High School, Central High School, Educational Complex Building One, Bertha C. Boschulte Middle School, Julius E. Sprauve School, Lockhart, Bowsky, Oliver, and Markoe Elementary Schools.

Current Progress

Throughout 2026, the Department continues to move multiple projects simultaneously through construction, environmental review, permitting, and procurement. Key accomplishments include:

- Completion or substantial completion of Arthur Richards PreK-8 and other early construction phases;
- Activation planning for immersive educational technology in newly completed campuses;
- Receipt of multiple FEMA environmental approvals (RECs);
- Advancement of Coastal Zone Management hearings; and
- Preparation of early construction packages that will allow additional projects to proceed without delay.

Looking Ahead (2027–2031)

Over the next several years, the Department anticipates completing the majority of the school replacement portfolio. By 2030, eleven major projects representing approximately 65 percent of the \$3.68 billion investment are expected to be complete. The remaining projects—including Tuitt Elementary, Kean High School, Sibilly Gym/Safe Room, Andrews, Larsen, and new administrative facilities on both St. Thomas and St. Croix—will continue through design, environmental approval, and construction, with final completion anticipated by 2031.

Transforming Learning, Not Simply Replacing Buildings

The Department's vision extends well beyond constructing new buildings. These facilities are being designed to support modern instructional practices through immersive technology, STEM integration, Career and Technical Education pathways, flexible learning environments, and intentional alignment from elementary through high school. This comprehensive approach ensures that every new school becomes a center for innovation, collaboration, and career readiness while preparing Virgin Islands students to compete successfully in college, the workforce, and an increasingly technology-driven global economy.

This historic investment is about more than recovering from the storms of 2017—it is about creating a world-class public education system that reflects the aspirations of our students, educators, families, and the people of the Virgin Islands for generations to come.

New Arthur A. Richards PreK-8

Our next and largest milestone to date will be the opening of the new Arthur A. Richards PreK-8 School on August 10, 2026. The design-build contractor and local subcontractor crews are working around the clock on the installation of fixtures, furniture, and equipment as well as landscaping, paving, outdoor play areas and the field. It was very refreshing to see the teaching pool completed and filled with water for use by our students.

As part of the VIDE's comprehensive transition plan, student placements have been finalized, employee transfers have been completed, and parent notifications have been distributed. District leadership and school

personnel continue to work diligently to complete the remaining operational, logistical, and instructional tasks necessary to ensure a seamless opening for students, faculty, and staff.

To support this effort, the district's transition and facilities teams meet weekly to discuss maintenance planning, operational readiness, building systems, staffing needs, and the coordinated activities required to successfully bring this state-of-the-art facility online. These meetings ensure that all stakeholders remain aligned, and that potential challenges are proactively addressed in advance of occupancy.

This project represents a historic milestone for the VIDE and the St. Croix District, as it marks the opening of the first newly constructed school campus territory-wide and for the district of St. Croix in more than thirty years. The Department and the ODR and its consultants worked tirelessly to raise the bar and attain FEMA approval of Industry Standards and bridging documents and estimates to which the schools are being re-built. The VIDE remains committed to ensuring that the new Arthur A. Richards PreK-8 School is fully prepared to provide a safe, innovative, and student-centered learning environment from day one. Intensive training on technology, innovation, and building operation and maintenance will take place this fall, and the contractor will remain engaged during the warranty period to support the facility. Maintenance is expected to cost at least \$5.00 per square foot per year and once the owner's manual is received, and RFP will be solicited for assistance with the maintenance of this facility.

As we approach this momentous occasion, we celebrate this achievement not only as an administration but as an entire community. We included the community from the beginning, before engaging consultants in developing the Facility Master Plan. The opening of the new Arthur A. Richards PreK-8 School reflects years of planning, collaboration, and investment in the future of our students. It stands as a testament to our collective commitment to educational excellence and to creating learning environments that will serve generations of students and families for years to come. The ribbon cutting is scheduled for August 7, 2026. To engage our community and allow people to celebrate this milestone, VIDE will host an appreciation barbeque with tours on August 8, 2026. Please visit our platforms to register now if you are interested in a tour.

Charlotte Amalie High School

The first contractor demolished buildings "A", "B", and "C" of Charlotte Amalie High School last summer. Upon attaining FEMA EHP clearance for earth moving activities in the areas of just those buildings in February 2025. VIDE staff worked with the contractor to accelerate the destructive portion of the schedule and with work that extended into the evening and weekends and cooperation of the principal and staff, demolition was finished in June 2025.

FEMA approved funding based on the bridging documents that were prepared per Industry Standards. The design-build team has been busy taking the bridging documents which were a 30% design and advancing them to the 100% design stage. The design looks great and is faithful to the original concepts. The design-build contractor has been mobilized to begin working. FEMA authorized earth moving activities for the remainder of the campus earlier this year. The first phase is the construction of two 3-story academic buildings which along with the Wheatley 9th Grade Center have the capacity to house the current student body, and the new administration building,

cafeteria, auditorium, and gymnasium. The final phase will be the construction of the third 3-story building, the track and field with additional parking.

Bertha C. Boschulte PreK-8

The Department of Property and Procurement selected the same design-build team that is rebuilding Charlotte Amalie High School to modernize the Bertha C. Boschulte PreK-8 School. FEMA has authorized the modernization, so the way is clear for construction to begin. Early construction packages orders for long-lead items are being prepared to enable execution of the work in phases. Some minor work has begun and technology and furniture are on order. Once VIDE receives a grant from the FEMA Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP), the contractor will build the Safe Room.

New Julius E. Sprauve PreK-12

The design of the New Julius E. Sprauve PreK-12 School has been approved by FEMA and were reviewed by the St. John Coastal Zone Management (CZM) Committee for a Federal Consistence Determination. The VIDE is working with DPP and the VIHA to acquire land diagonally across the street from the site for development into a ball field. The school will contain all the Industry Standard features with foundations that minimize site disturbance. Historic areas of the site will not be disturbed.

New Central High School

The community recently joined us to celebrate at the St. Croix Central High School Groundbreaking Ceremony. This milestone marked the start of construction even though the design is still in progress. The project has officially transitioned from planning and design to visible implementation. The demolition of the Gymnasium is underway on the south side of the property, marking the beginning of a transformative chapter for public education in the St. Croix District.

The new St. Croix Central High School will be the second newly built school campus in the district. Upon completion of the new academic buildings, students, faculty, and staff will transition into the facility, allowing for the final phase of the project to commence. This phase will include the demolition of the remaining existing structures and the development of new athletic fields and recreational spaces.

St. Croix Educational Complex- Modernization

The design firm is separate from the construction firm and is preparing the design in stages and has issued drawings for Building 1. Since this is an existing building, VIDE staff who know the building systems and trouble spots are working hand in hand with the design team and the contractor to develop scopes and resolve issues in the field. Orders for long-lead items are being prepared to enable execution of the work in phases. Some minor work has begun and technology

and furniture are on order. Once VIDE receives a grant from the FEMA Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP), the contractor will build the Safe Room.

Bundled Schools on St. Thomas and St. Croix

The ODR has selected a design-build team to design and deliver 11 facilities across both districts. VIDE has bridging documents which are 30% designs in hand for Markoe, Henderson and Lockhart, and 30% designs are in progress for the remaining facilities which are Andrews, Larsen, St. Croix Administration Center, Bowsky, Oliver, Tuitt, Kean HS, and St. Thomas Administration Center.

Project Timelines

The typical project timelines developed with FEMA for a New School is 5 Years

Phase 1 begins at contract execution.

Phase 1 lasts 18 months – Develop 30% design, submit 30% design to DPNR for a Federal Consistency Determination from the CZM Committee and simultaneously submit the 30% design to FEMA for approval.

Phase 2 lasts 12 months – Complete design and early construction work that does not involve ground disturbance.

Phase 3 lasts 3 years – Construction. Note that high schools may take longer.

Collaboration with Stakeholders

The Virgin Islands Department of Education (VIDE) holds a standing bi-weekly PW Implementation Meeting with the Bureau of School Construction and Maintenance (BSCM), and the Office of Disaster Recovery (ODR) and its consultants and other agencies to discuss all VIDE disaster recovery projects. At this meeting, schedules, reports, designs and other issues are shared and discussed.

The VIDE Architect has two administrative staff and one DR project manager as direct reports and one former DR project manager who is now a school project manager has assigned from the Bureau. The administrative staff coordinate with the Department of Planning and Natural Resources (DPNR) and prepares all applications for the Federal Consistency Determination (FCD) required for federally funded projects. Updates on the FCD status of all projects are also provided at the PW Implementation Meeting. More local staff would assist the architect by working hand-in-hand with the contractors, many of whom are from off-island, to get projects started in the territory and sequence and phase work in ways that minimize disruption to students and staff. The staff salaries would be reimbursed by FEMA.

Benefits to New Facilities

The completion of these school facilities will deliver transformative educational, operational, and community benefits that extend well beyond the construction of new buildings. These projects represent a long-term investment in the future of the Virgin Islands and will provide students, educators, and families with modern learning environments designed to support academic excellence and student well-being.

Educational Benefits

- Provide safe, resilient, and state-of-the-art learning environments that enhance teaching and learning.
- Increase student engagement, attendance, and academic performance by offering classrooms equipped with modern instructional technology and flexible learning spaces.
- Expand opportunities for career and technical education (CTE), STEM, arts, athletics, and specialized instructional programs.
- Improve accessibility and compliance with federal and territorial requirements, ensuring equitable access for all students, including those with disabilities.
- Strengthen student wellness through enhanced counseling spaces, health services, and collaborative learning environments that support the whole child.

Operational Benefits

- Replace aging and storm-damaged infrastructure with facilities built to modern building codes and designed to withstand future natural disasters.
- Reduce maintenance and utility costs through energy-efficient systems, resilient construction, and sustainable building practices.
- Improve campus safety through updated security systems, controlled access points, and emergency preparedness features.
- Eliminate reliance on temporary facilities and modular classrooms, creating more stable and efficient school operations.

- Enhance the recruitment and retention of high-quality educators and staff by providing modern, well-equipped workplaces.

Community Benefits

- Restore community confidence in the public education system by demonstrating a sustained commitment to educational excellence.
- Serve as community assets that can support meetings, emergency response, recreational activities, and educational programming outside of regular school hours.
- Generate economic activity through construction, local employment opportunities, and long-term workforce development.
- Strengthen partnerships with families, businesses, and community organizations by providing welcoming spaces for engagement and collaboration.
- Increase neighborhood pride and contribute to the long-term revitalization of surrounding communities through the development of modern educational campuses.

Collectively, these facilities will position the Virgin Islands Department of Education to deliver high-quality, equitable educational opportunities while creating resilient, efficient, and community-centered schools that prepare students for success in college, careers, and civic life.

Comprehensive Projects

PROJECT INFORMATION		FUNDING				
Project	District	PW Number	PW Amount	HMGP	PW Number Rev 1	Reversion 1 Amount
Andrews PK-8	STX	1381	\$ 83,888,330.18	\$ 22,715,067.00		
Central HS	STX	1261	\$ 275,321,822.55		1414	\$ 102,640,180.00
Complex/CTECH HS & Discovery	STX	1377	\$ 36,068,820.00	\$ 11,315,524.00		
Henderson PK-8	STX	1290	\$ 82,394,675.62			
Larsen PK-8	STX	1382	\$ 138,107,087.01	\$ 15,078,933.00		
Markoe PK-8	STX	1372	\$ 155,652,238.87	\$ 15,078,933.00		
Richards PK-8	STX	1052	\$ 232,539,498.00		1406	\$ 83,369,035.14
Abraham Adult Ed/CTECH	STTJ	1398	\$ 65,786,659.42			
Boschulte PK-8	STTJ	1346	\$ 2,300,395.61		1396	\$ 121,755,467.00
Bowsky PK-8	STTJ	1368	\$ 6,229,715.00	\$ 19,489,818.00		
Charlotte Amaiile HS	STTJ	1413	\$ 410,190,346.00			
Kean HS & Discovery	STTJ	1417	\$ 240,554,216.96			
Lockhart PK-8	STTJ	1351	\$ 6,493,842.38			
Oliver PK-8	STTJ	1412	\$ 21,648,119.19	\$ 17,090,899.00		
Sprauve PK-12	STTJ	1360	\$ 147,880,122.25	\$ 22,715,067.00		
Tuitt PK-8	STTJ	1367	\$ 83,961,978.97			
Subtotal			\$ 1,989,011,668.01	\$ 123,484,241.00		\$ 307,764,682.14

Targeted Projects

PROJECT INFORMATION		FUNDING	
Project	District	PW Number	PW Amount
Gardine PK-8	STX	1408	\$ 169,255,891.26
Dunbavin Alternative Ed	STX	1380	\$ 2,650,962.73
St. Croix Administration Center	STX	1275	\$ 12,604,604.14
St. Croix Adult CTECH & Ed	STX	1392	\$ 17,715,432.89
Wheatley	STX	1273	\$ 1,883,415.00
Sloilly PK-3	STTJ	1390	\$ 38,027,216.05
Edith Williams Alternative Ed	STTJ	1388	\$ 37,851,862.00
Guy Benjamin Center	STTJ	1356	\$ 7,785,034.88
Ulla Muller Center	STTJ	1410	\$ 101,663,543.62
STT Administration Center	STTJ	1339	\$ 52,813,108.66
STT Campus Additions and Phase 2 Projects	STTJ		
STX Campus Additions and Phase 2 Projects	STTJ		
Subtotal			\$ 442,251,073.23

GRAND TOTAL of Comprehensive Projects and Targeted Projects

					PW Number Rev 1	Reversion 1
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School	Funding Sources	Amount Expended to Date (Will be updated the day of the hearing)	Projected Construction Completion Date (*Subject to ODR approvals)
Arthur A. Richards PreK-8	FEMA		July 31, 2026
Boschulte	FEMA	\$16,298,686.00	05/29/2030*
Bowsky	FEMA	4,773,885.00	01/14/2030*
Central	FEMA	27,467,010.00	05/31/2030*
Complex	FEMA	5,556,377.00	08/23/2030*
Charlotte	FEMA	40,238,189.00	12/03/2029*
Henderson	FEMA	1,256,296.51	02/22/2030*
Markoe	FEMA	1,471,656.82	03/28/2031*

Conclusion

In closing, the Virgin Islands Department of Education stands at a defining moment in its history. After years of recovery, planning, and perseverance, we are now transforming our vision into reality through the construction and modernization of schools that will serve generations of Virgin Islands students. These projects represent more than new buildings—they are investments in educational excellence, student achievement, teacher effectiveness, and the long-term prosperity of our territory.

Thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony and to share the progress we have made. My team and I remain committed to transparency, accountability, and delivering these critical projects on behalf of the people of the Virgin Islands. We stand ready to respond to any questions the Committee may have and look forward to continuing our partnership as we advance this historic investment in the future of public education.