

# Educators' Walkout in St. Croix Steals Spotlight in Senate Committee Hearing

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As senators from the Senate Committee on Rules & Judiciary convened on Wednesday to discuss the 28 appropriations bills presented by the Budget, Appropriations and Finance committee the previous day, their attention was predominantly captured by [the walkout of educators from multiple schools across St. Croix](#).

Senator Franklin Johnson said that he had conversed with several protesters while on his way to the legislative session. The concerns they raised are “some vexing and serious issues in regards to our schools,” he said, noting that he supports educators because, especially in this instance, their interest is aligned with that of students. “You cannot teach children in this environment, that’s not conducive,” he remarked. He said that amid record-breaking temperatures, windows in some classrooms are unable to be opened. Mr. Johnson claimed that the faucets had been closed off at

Pearl B. Larsen Elementary School. “So the children come to school they don’t even have water to drink,” he lamented. Following an initial supply of water at the beginning of the school year, the senator says no action has been taken by the Department of Education on the issue.

In an interview with Consortium journalists earlier on Wednesday, President of the St. Croix chapter of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) Rosa Soto-Thomas said that apart from unbearable heat, educators have been forced to contend with a laundry list of deficiencies in the system. She mentioned an expired collective bargaining agreement, along with unsupported mandates such as purchasing electronic books (e-books) for student bodies in which a significant number of learners do not own a computer. Even those with computers are hindered, she said, because internet speeds were so slow. “We have all this broadband that the government has invested in, but it isn’t trickling down to the classroom,” she complained.

In committee minutes later, lawmakers recited a host of issues which they say are behind the educators’ decision to absent themselves from their posts on Wednesday morning. Mr. Franklin noted a lack of specialty staff such as special education workers, and a lack of teaching staff in general, leading to large class sizes, often without paraprofessional support. In other scenarios, a paraprofessional is doing full teaching because of the lack of teachers in the system, he claimed. Mr. Johnson also said that school buildings are infested with rodents and termites, and lack necessary equipment. A teacher at one of St. Croix’s elementary schools told him of her efforts to teach a cooking class without a refrigerator or stove.

Senator Novelle Francis continued recounting the host of issues plaguing school plants across St. Croix. “Lack of supplies,” the senator intoned. “Employee shortages, broken freezers and coolers, air quality tests,” he continued. “Need for school security, working cameras, insufficient school buses...lack of copier machines,” Mr. Francis continued.

Ms. Soto-Thomas told Consortium journalists that she was not sure what her members would do moving forward to press their case for action from the Virgin Islands Department of Education. Wednesday’s walkout, however, certainly captured the attention of those well-placed to make an impact.

“These are all issues that I believe are within our purview...that we should be able to handle,” Mr. Francis said. “At the appropriate time I know that we’ll be sitting down collectively to try to address these issues.”