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St. Croix Students Continue Historic Protests; V.I. Board of Education Seeks Greater Power in Determining School Suitability

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Students from the St. Croix Educational Complex and St. Croix Central High School on Monday, Sept. 25 protested learning conditions. By. ERNICE GILBERT, V.I. CONSORTIUM

As historic protests by students of the St. Croix Educational Complex and the Central High School intensify, the V.I. Board of Education has made a formal appeal for more authority in deciding the suitability of schools for learning. Students, demanding improved learning conditions, have been rallying against issues ranging from lack of air conditioning to mold and structural deficiencies in their schools.

In a press statement released on Monday, the board addressed the ongoing educational disruptions in the St. Croix district, expressing their commitment to students and parents. It also addressed the V.I. Department of Education. While the board has traditionally held authority for inspecting and overseeing school infrastructure, it does not currently possess the power to shut down any facility, even if it's deemed not conducive for learning. In light of the current challenges, the board is seeking the Senate's approval to gain the authority to close any facility it finds unsafe or unsuitable for students and staff.

Board Chairman Dr. Kyza A. Callwood accentuated the Board's dedication, stating, "The Board is committed to working closely with [the V.I. Dept. of Education] students, personnel, unions, and other stakeholders to transform our schools into environments where pre-existing problems are no longer the norm."

This declaration from the Board of Education comes against the backdrop of the escalating unrest in St. Croix's educational sector. As previously reported, the island has witnessed a series of protests and job actions by educators and students alike, advocating for better conditions in schools. The students' recent marches and the heartfelt letters of concern have added urgency to these calls for change.

On Monday, they gathered on the grounds of the St. Croix Educational Complex, near the roadside, protesting learning conditions as they did on Friday. They called for immediate action by those in authority, including Dept. of Education Commissioner Dr. Dionne Wells-Hedrington, and Governor Albert Bryan. They also assailed two senators who stopped by to address the students.

Senator Kenneth Gittens, who said he had received a commitment from Mrs. Wells-Hedrington to address the students in person, said he also sought a similar outcome from the governor. At the time, Mr. Gittens said the governor had not responded. Both Gittens and Senator Dianne Capehart were met with resistance at the protest, with students and supporters alike contending that the lawmakers — like the members of Mr. Bryan's executive branch — should be well aware of the structural deficiencies of the schools.