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'Welcome to the Revolution!': Placard-bearing Students, Parents Protesting Abysmal School Conditions Respond to Lawmakers With Disdain

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Senator Kenneth Gittens faced resistance from the crowd of students, parents and guardians on Monday, Sept. 25, despite bringing refreshments as a peace offering. By. ERNICE GILBERT, V.I. CONSORTIUM

“You know it’s time for change when children act like leaders and leaders act like children,” read one of the placards held by students from two St. Croix schools, who were out again on Monday vocalizing their displeasure over learning conditions in classrooms on the Big Island. “We are tired of being silenced,” said Malia Navarro, a senior at the Educational Complex High School and one of the leading organizers of the protests.

One speaker noted that despite being historical rivals, students from Central and Complex were united that morning in their opposition to the continuation of the status quo, coming together to place a spotlight on the poor learning conditions being endured by the student body of both institutions.

Protesting students were adamant that the arduous heat and lack of air conditioning were not the only issues being highlighted by the student action. Mold, termites, leaking ceilings, and other structural issues with the physical school plants were also problems that needed to be solved, students said. They also spoke up about paltry pay for teachers and school monitors, and the lack of financial support for learning materials in the classroom. "My mom buys school supplies for her classroom. I can't afford this!" one protester's sign read.

Lack of funding for school maintenance workers and equipment was also a factor which prompted the action. Students pointed out that Complex was a hurricane shelter, and therefore poor maintenance of the buildings would necessarily affect the wider community as well. Students also expressed disgust at the chronic neglect and underfunding of the education system as a whole, and said that they were fighting for change so that future Crucian children would not have to endure the same conditions they are currently grappling with. Spokespersons for the protesters vowed to continue this and similar actions until authorities speak directly to their grievances and articulate a clear plan to address them. "Someone from the Big House needs to come down to us and speak to us about this," a placard-holder demanded. "We want to have answers," she said, to rousing cheers.

Parents and guardians were also present to support their children. One mother excoriated the government for overseeing an education system where at times school bathrooms are not sufficiently stocked with items as basic as toilet paper. Parents and students wondered where the huge budgets appropriated to the Department of Education have been going over the years, as they argue that investment is not being seen in either school infrastructure or in personnel. A father told the gathered protesters that he had to move his daughter to the mainland after she developed chronic health issues from attending an elementary school on the island, and then was victimized after her parents began to speak out.

Senator Diane Capeheart, who told the protesters that her three daughters attended Complex, expressed support for the action that was unfolding on Monday morning. She disclosed that Department of Education officials, the last time they were before the Senate Committee on Education & Workforce Development, of which she is a member, they indicated to lawmakers that the school plants were in order ahead of the start of the new school year. "They said they did a walkthrough and came before the Legislature and said everything was good," Sen. Capeheart declared, saying that the Committee would be seeking accountability from the commissioner of Education on the matter. However, she faced pushback from the crowd at her attempts to frame the problem as one solely in the hands of the department and the executive branch. Her claims that lawmakers were only recently made aware of the problems plaguing St. Croix's educational system were roundly rejected by those present. "Everybody, from the executive branch to the legislative branch, all you dropped the ball," argued Daren Stevens, a parent who has served in leadership positions on parent-teacher associations at the St. Croix Central High School.

"A ball may have been dropped," acknowledged Ms. Capeheart, eliciting further derision from the crowd. Mr. Stevens criticized lawmakers for the practice of only requesting testimony from department heads, suggesting that they might receive more accurate information about the state of things on the ground if they showed interest in hearing from lower-level workers, the "footsoldiers" in the various government agencies.

Protesters continued to press Ms. Capeheart for accountability as a lawmaker, asking whether she was not aware when she was campaigning that conditions in schools were poor. The senator took umbrage at the passionate response of the crowd. “I am not here to be accosted by anyone,” she said, arguing that her presence should prove her benevolent intentions. While a student waved a placard that read “No more excuses, we need a change!” Ms. Capeheart again emphasized that education officials testified before the Senate prior to the start of the school year that things were in place, and again, protesters rejected her perceived attempts to dodge accountability.

“This administration and the present senators are just doing the same thing that governors have done before this present government,” said the parent who spoke directly after Ms. Capeheart. He rejected her explanation that a walkthrough by legislators just “didn’t happen,” stating that if lawmakers prioritized students and education, they would have insisted on personally apprising themselves of the prevailing conditions. A parent derided the lawmakers as “clowns,” saying that they tolerated executive branch officials coming before them multiple times without answers to the questions that are being posed.

After Ms. Capeheart left, the children who remained to demonstrate continued to express their disappointment in the legislature’s seeming laissez-faire approach, noting that some of the problems have persisted for years. As passing cars honked in solidarity, students continued to express their frustration and disappointment at what they saw as excuses, idle talk, and lack of accountability from the lawmaker. Former senator Genevieve Whitaker noted that the Board of Education is required to submit a School Accountability Report which speaks to the status of various components of the education system. “They are aware,” Ms. Whitaker said. She called on education officials to “do their work” in drawing down on federal grant funding that was awarded as long as two years ago, and using them to implement positive change in the school system.

Senator Kenneth Gittens faced similar resistance from the crowd as his colleague Ms. Capeheart, despite bringing refreshments as a peace offering. He told protesters that Education Commissioner Dionne Wells-Hedrington had promised to meet personally with students this week to advise of plans moving forward. The senator noted that the Legislature had recently passed a billion-dollar budget, and expressed hope that education officials would put their allocation to good use, although he could not personally “hold anybody’s hand” and force them to take action. He acknowledged that the lack of adequate preparation efforts over the summer had led to today’s protests, to which a child retorted “last year too, and the year before!”

Another student confronted Mr. Gittens directly, lambasting him for implying that the longstanding issues were somehow unknown prior to this summer. “People are supposed to be held accountable,” said Mr. Gittens, noting that workers in various government agencies report to their superior officers and ultimately to the governor. “That’s who they answer to, they don’t answer to the Legislature.” The lawmaker also refuted blanket allegations of corruption among lawmakers, but frustrated protesters shouted him down. “Stop lie!” they chanted to his retreating back. One student held aloft a placard – “They don’t care about us!”

The negative reaction of students and parents towards lawmakers exemplified the level of anger and frustration many citizens feel towards a government that they believe is not listening or working on behalf of the people, an attitude people on Monday felt is demonstrated in the current dysfunctional state of the territory’s education system.