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Dept. of Education Attempts to Calm Frustration on St. Croix as Protests Bring Maintenance Negligence to the Fore

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V.I. Dept. of Education Commissioner Dionne Wells-Hedrington during an event on Thursday, Sept. 28, 2023 aimed at addressing issues impacting learning on St. Croix.

On Thursday, as its lawyers prepared to take the St. Croix chapter of the American Federation of Teachers [to court](#) over their protests highlighting working conditions they claim are hazardous to health and safety, Department of Education officials produced a streaming broadcast aimed at offering “clarity, transparency, and accurate information” around various issues in the education system.

Commissioner of Education Dr. Dionne Wells-Hedrington, joined by senior officials from the district of St. Croix, spoke to studio cameras about recent efforts to combat soaring temperatures in classrooms, challenges with managing the influx of federal funds, the timeline for school repairs and construction, and the chronic maintenance issues associated with keeping aging school plants open until new ones can be built.

Opting against face-to-face engagement with the media or general public, officials instead responded to questions submitted prior to the event by email, and some questions posed by viewers of the live broadcast. One of those was about the perception that a deluge of federal dollars was being spent too slowly by the department. Commissioner Wells-Hedrington said that the issue was due to capacity constraints, both within the department as well as externally. "When Covid hit, the department received an excessive amount of funds that they had never received before," she said, explaining that she quickly realized upon assuming office that she would have to take a more active role in spending decisions. "I made sure that we had weekly meetings with the programs, we talked about challenges, anything that we could do, from my level." However, external factors also play a part in the delays, said Wells-Hedrington. Going through the contractual bidding process is a grueling, time-consuming task for local contractors, she said. While the commissioner acknowledged that it is "accurate" to say that the funds have been available since 2021, she argued the money was "not the only part" of the process. The department is now "looking at our structures and systems" to try to reach greater levels of efficiency and efficacy as it comes to spending the federal monies it has been allocated.

Prompted by D.O.E. Public Relations Director Shayla Benjamin, who hosted the program, Wells-Hedrington also made the argument that it was not necessarily prudent to expend large amounts of money in attempts to remediate issues at aging school plants, many of which have been designated for replacement. Noting that the 56-year old Central High School is one such school, the commissioner queried "how much money are we going to put into Central High at this point, knowing that it's going to be demolished?" However, she quickly assured that the facilities would not just be left in their current condition, given that new infrastructure may not come online for another six years. "We got to do something, whether it's a temporary fix, it has to be done now," Wells-Hedrington said.

Architect Chaneel Callwood took the time to highlight the completion of a key milestone for the first school rebuild project - pouring concrete for the cistern of what will be the new Arthur Richards Elementary school, which she says should be completed in two to three years. Wells-Hedrington, while acknowledging the complaints of students currently enduring poor classroom conditions, continued to look forward to the new facilities which she said were on the horizon. "We're in a good place - when I say that I say that with confidence," she asserted, explaining that the Federal Emergency Management Agency had ultimately approved a much larger scope of work than it had initially. "By the end of the day, we're going to have way more funding than we've ever had in the territory to really deal with our structures. Our students deserve to be in state of the art facilities...but it's a process."

In the interim, she said that education officials were busy trying to secure more funds for the upkeep and maintenance of the current dilapidated school infrastructure. "Because the \$2 million that we receive territory-wide is no money," Wells-Hedrington said, explaining that the sum is supposed to cover maintenance work on all 43 sites run by the Department of Education. Landscaping alone costs up to \$400,000 annually, said the commissioner, leaving \$600,000 for school repairs on St. Croix. "It was never enough," she stated, noting that maintenance has been underfunded in this manner for years. In 2015, an assessment from the Office of Insular Affairs reportedly noted \$70 million in deferred maintenance in schools across the territory. "So that's

why we are here today,” she said.

Those viewing the live broadcast, while somewhat appreciative of the plans being outlined, were more interested in hearing what concrete plans the department had to fix the issues affecting students now. Wells-Hedrington made sure to note that many of the solutions have been in process since before the protests brought classroom conditions to the front of the public’s attention. Fans had been ordered and were being delivered and installed in batches, she said, and the air conditioning needs at several schools were being addressed. “Things were started,” she argued, to include long-awaited kitchen renovations.

An hour into the 2.5 hour-long broadcast, the discussion turned to what the department’s immediate plans were to address some of the more serious issues affecting students, teachers and others on school campuses. Wells-Hedrington vowed to fix bathrooms at the St. Croix Educational Complex within 30 days, but said that some of the issues were not due to the lack of maintenance. “We painted, we fixed, they came in, they destroyed,” she complained, saying that students had deliberately vandalized the stalls. “Broken seats are not maintenance, broken seats means that a child went into the restroom and destroyed the property,” Wells-Hedrington contended. She implored students to hold their counterparts accountable, to develop a culture of working “together to maintain what we have.” Nevertheless, she vowed to effect the needed repairs within a month’s time, as well as to immediately address the lack of supplies in school restrooms.

Complaints about water quality, she said, were outside the capacity of the school to address, as odor and discoloration in pipe borne water has been something the Water and Power Authority (WAPA) has been [working to address](#) across the island. However, she acknowledged a lapse in communication, saying that students should have been notified about water quality issues so that they could bring their own water to school. Cases of water will also be distributed to schools in the interim to ensure that students have access to clean drinking water.

Mr. Yancy Milligan, acting maintenance director at Education, asked the community to exercise patience as the department grapples with upgrading the electrical systems of schools with pending installations of air conditioning units, explaining that officials were moving carefully to ensure that the new purchases would not be damaged or destroyed by faulty electricals. Classrooms also had to be prepared for the new units, he said, particularly in schools such as Eulalie Rivera which have not previously had air conditioning. “We have to insulate the rooms, we have to make sure that windows are closing properly,” said Mr. Milligan. Meanwhile, maintenance officials have been installing industrial-grade fans in classrooms to mitigate the effects of the heat, but that process has been delayed by an unsteady supply of the needed equipment.

Complaints about mold and mildew in classrooms were redirected into criticism of the actions of teachers and students in schools. Territorial Facilities Director Davidson Charlemagne said that “most of the issues” in that regard are being caused by condensation issues. He gave an example where air conditioned classrooms are being left open to the air from outside, which causes water in the moist external air to condense when it hits the cool coming from the a/c, thus leading to increased mildewing. “We all need to play our part,” he said. Meanwhile, the department does conduct continual mold remediation at a cost of up to \$60,000 per classroom, Davidson noted. However, officials did acknowledge that leaks in piping and ducting are also contributing to the problem.

A reported termite infestation at Central High school was the result of the mahogany trees surrounding the structures, said Milligan, the acting maintenance director. Working together with the University of the Virgin Islands, D.O.E. said it will be embarking on a project to prune and

clean the trees. Things will have to proceed carefully, he warned, both because of mahogany's special status in the territory, as well as the necessity of dismantling termite nests in such a manner as to prevent them dispersing into new colonies elsewhere. This would be addressed within the next 60 days, he said. At St. Croix Educational Complex, the problem is different. Termites were actually coming from underground in search of water, Milligan said, and eradicating them would mean boring a hole through the auditorium's stage to chemically treat the termites under the ground. He did not give a timeline for the completion of that work.

Alan Fleming, chief operations officer at Education, spoke to the issue of walkthroughs and ongoing maintenance. "The walkthroughs aren't to make sure that everything is perfect in the schools," he said, attempting to dispel the belief that the practice is supposed to catch every deficiency in the physical school plant. Instead, their purpose is to ensure "life safety," Fleming declared. He also noted that school maintenance is an ongoing task, noting that 173 work orders have been generated in the time since school reopened, in addition to what was already pending. He disclosed that some students might have to wait years for air conditioning units to be installed in their classroom as D.O.E.'s maintenance department grapples with the enormous workload before it. "It's going to put a strain...on maintenance. We'll actually be reaching out to contractors to assist us in some of these issues," Mr. Fleming said.

Commissioner Wells-Hedrington acknowledged that much of the public's anxiety over issues in the education system is arising from the lack of clear timelines when it comes to the work that D.O.E. says it is performing regarding addressing these chronic maintenance issues. She promised that "Everything that we discussed...will be published on our platform so that the public can hold us accountable."

She noted that much of the work to address specific pain points is already in some stage of progress - kitchen upgrades have been contracted, and solicitations have gone out for intercom systems and surveillance cameras. Requests for proposals to repair or install fencing have been prepared, furniture for libraries has been procured. Wells-Hedrington committed to providing more regular updates on the various ongoing projects as and when those updates become necessary.