

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Bryan Defends Dept. of Education on School Maintenance Controversy, Calls AFT 'Disingenuous'

Government / **Published On October 13, 2023 04:35 AM /**

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Governor Albert Bryan Jr. during his interview with Consortium Publisher Ernice Gilbert, on Oct. 12, 2023 at Gov't House in St. Thomas. By: V.I. CONSORTIUM

Issues plaguing schools in the St Croix district were the first point of discussion during Governor Albert Bryan Jr.'s latest exclusive sit-down interview with Consortium Publisher Ernice Gilbert on Thursday evening. Last month, complaints relating to excruciating classroom heat, less-than-ideal physical environments, and lack of equipment pushed first [teachers](#) and subsequently [students](#) to stage separate protests, disrupting learning for several days.

Governor Bryan noted information revealed in an ill-fated [lawsuit](#) filed by the government against the teacher's union on St. Croix – that government officials had met with members of the St. Croix arm of the American Federation of Teachers only [days before](#) they staged protest action. The meeting afforded the aggrieved a chance to air their concerns, and according to Governor Bryan, temporary solutions were decided upon, including [half-day schedules](#) to reduce the effects of the heatwave in schools. It is for this reason that the governor said he was “perplexed” by their protest days later, and referred to the leadership of St. Croix’s AFT as “disingenuous,” despite union President Rosa Soto-Thomas denying knowledge of the job action prior to the event. Their time, he said, may have been used more wisely if they were to protest the “chronic shame” that is low student scores.

Despite castigating teachers over their decision to leave their posts, Governor Bryan applauded students for exercising their right to protest against unfavorable conditions. He clarified, however, that “nothing they’re protesting about is going to be fixed tomorrow.” He referred to calls for air conditioning in classrooms, revealing that the schools, many of which were constructed some forty years ago, were not built to accommodate air conditioning. Going that route, he said, would be equivalent to “setting ourselves up for failure because instead of having one air conditioning [unit] for school, we would have a split unit in every single classroom. That’s a maintenance nightmare.”

Based on the age of several of the territory’s schools, Mr. Bryan posited that “as quickly as you can fix things, other things fall apart.” He dismissed the suggestion that maintaining schools during summers or through the extended period of remote learning during the Covid-19 pandemic could have prevented some of the ongoing issues. In early October, the Department of Education [announced its intention](#) to remedy a host of issues in the St. Croix district by October 31st, but Governor Bryan is skeptical about the timeline. “There are some things that you’re gonna fix in 30 days but it’s impossible to fix all those things.” He says there are not enough supplies, equipment, or personnel to do so in such a short space of time.

Even across a longer timeframe, the governor anticipates that personnel issues will impact some \$850 million in new contracts dedicated to the rebuild of schools. He stated, “\$850 million is more capital projects than we’ve done in the Virgin Islands in the last 30 years combined. In one fell swoop, we’re trying to rebuild the entire Virgin Islands’ schools.” The governor also revealed that about \$40 million will be spent to rewire current schools to make them compliant with air conditioning systems.

The current low unemployment rate, estimated at 3.3 percent, is at the heart of the governor’s concerns regarding the ability to begin projects aimed at remediating territorial disaster recovery issues in a timely fashion. The education department, he says, continues to seek out workers to install air conditioning units, and fix bathrooms among several other projects. Supply chain problems are compounding the issue as well. “Yes, it’s a bad situation,” he admitted, “but we’ve got to figure out a way to get the kids their education, and still be able to deal with the issues that we have.”

In January, President Joseph Biden is expected to make available more infrastructural funding to various state and local governments, but the governor is concerned that may only compound the territory’s construction woes. “How are we going to get drawings done? How are we going to get material because of all the bridges, roads, and schools

that will be going on in the U.S.? All of that takes from what we're doing.”

To minimize the impact of the labor shortage, the governor shared that the director of the Office of Budgeting Management is currently accompanying a consultancy group on “a tour of the United States” to attract large companies to bid on the USVI’s infrastructure projects.

As teachers and students wait for movement on promised school improvement projects, Governor Bryan chastised members of the media and public commentators who have referred to the territory’s public schools as deplorable. “Have you been in deplorable schools? You walk into a school and be like this is deplorable? Certainly not,” he contested. Several schools in St. Croix continue to operate on an abbreviated schedule due to the ongoing heat creating unfavorable conditions for learning.

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