

Image not found or type unknown

School Sanitation Crisis: Students Speak Out on Deplorable Bathroom Conditions During Senate Hearing

Students voice concerns over unhygienic conditions and lack of basic amenities

Education / **Published On November 17, 2023 05:33 AM /**

Janeke Simon **November 17, 2023**

Image not found or type unknown

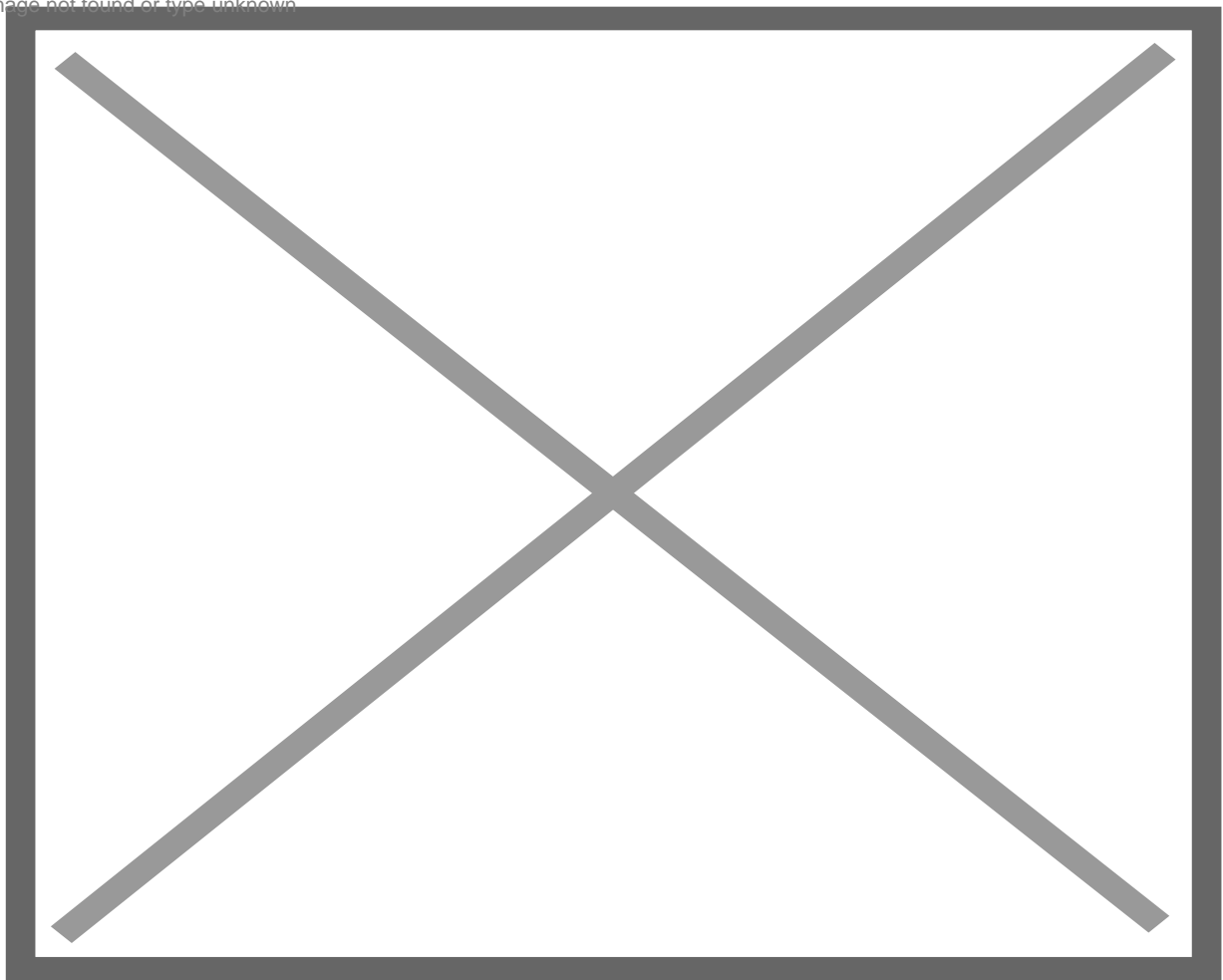


Image depicting an unsanitary restroom. By. GETTY IMAGES

Several St. Croix students appeared before the Senate Committee on Education and Workforce Development this week to talk about how infrastructural challenges are affecting their learning experience. A standout issue in the testimony from the young people was challenges with the bathroom facilities at their learning institutions.

Eighth-grade student Alina Poyah told committee members, “the situation at Central High School is no improvement over what we’ve experienced at [John H.] Woodson.” She said that there are “dysfunctional toilets in all women’s restrooms, and limited cleaning...makes it hard to maintain a clean environment, rendering these facilities unusable.” Stating that there are only three cleaning employees for the entire school, Ms. Poyah disclosed that she has “refused to ever use those bathrooms due to how dirty they are.”

Makayla Walcott, another student of John H. Woodson, also highlighted the bathrooms for criticism. “While at Woodson, students constantly avoided using the bathroom, there was never enough paper towels or soap in the dispenser.” The graffiti in the stalls, she says, is “disgusting and repulsive.” Meanwhile, some of the washroom facilities are in “concerning” states of disrepair. “Personally, I didn’t even feel comfortable enough to go to the bathroom regularly, and I can attest to many of my friends feeling the same way.” Of the bathrooms at Central High, Walcott said that she had no personal experience because “I have not stepped foot into one. However, every single student I have spoken to says the same thing – the bathrooms are in terrible condition and just downright disgusting.”

Some bathrooms are functional, she conceded, but those are few and far between. “Students must walk down the stairs and guess their way around the campus to find a good bathroom,” she added, stating that her bathroom boycott would continue into the foreseeable future.

St. Croix Educational Complex sophomore Ace Poyer wondered how the public would be able to occupy the facility as a hurricane shelter given the dismal state of the washrooms on campus. “Half the urinals are dysfunctional, light bulbs need changing and door locks are broken,” he said. “The constant lack of soap, toilet paper and paper towels adds to how unsanitary the restrooms are.” He tries to hold his urine until he gets home, Boyer told senators, “because I try to avoid these restrooms as much as humanly possible.”

Jean Fabian of Central also structures his elimination needs around the desire to avoid using the school facilities. “I go to school at 7 in the morning before my classes begin. I’ll leave school around 6:00 p.m. if I have something to do for the [school] clubs, and I still have not used the bathroom.”

Committee chair Senator Marise James was horrified to learn of the students’ plight. “You are damaging your bodies. We are damaging your bodies. Let’s take the blame – the adults in the room,” she said.

In response to a query from Senator Carla Joseph, education officials disclosed that a contract to repair fourteen bathrooms at Central High School has been awarded to a local construction firm. However, Territorial Facilities Manager in the Department of Education Davidson Charlemagne warned that “completion date will not be something that we could just say it’s going to be overnight because we’re gonna do all 14 of these restrooms.”

Pressed for a timeline, the department’s Acting Insular Superintendent for St. Croix, Dr. Ericilda Ottley Herman, said that “our goal is to have that finished within 90 days...we’ve committed to updates if something occurs.” Instead of January or February, however, which is when the 90-day period would expire, Mr. Charlemagne eventually disclosed that the construction contract runs through May 2024.

When Ms. Ottley Herman tried to argue that the age of the school buildings could complicate renovation work, Sen. Marise James rebutted by pointing out that many historical buildings are much, much older. “I think the White House is really old. I think Government House is really old.

I think the problem is maintenance.”

In a late September discussion between education officials, Education Commissioner Dionne Wells-Hedrington specifically addressed the topic. “I have a fetish with bathrooms,” she declared, saying that she was very upset to see some of the images that have been shared showing the disrepair of those facilities. Then, she vowed that supplies from the department’s warehouse would be immediately distributed to schools across St. Croix. “It’s available, it’s not that we don’t have them,” she continued, adding, “I don’t know what happened in between.”

Dr. Wells-Hedrington also vowed to make concerted efforts to quickly restore campus restrooms to a state of functionality, but held the students themselves responsible for some of the destruction that has been wrought. “Broken seats is not maintenance. Broken seats means that a child went into the restroom and destroyed the property,” she argued, saying that the department has experienced this problem at the St. Croix Educational Complex. “We painted, we fixed, they came in, they destroyed.”

She appealed to students to apply positive peer pressure to their classmates so that students are not undoing the progress being made by the department, albeit slowly.