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Lawmakers Question School Rebuild Resilience in Face of Stronger Storms and Hotter Temperatures

Seven years post-Hurricanes Irma and Maria, the USVI confronts dual challenges of constructing storm-proof schools and managing extreme heat, with full recovery still up to a decade away

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Nelcia Charlemagne **June 04, 2024**

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Architect's rendering of the new Arthur A. Richards PreK-8 School campus By. V.I. DEPT. OF EDUCATION

Warmer earth temperatures are creating unprecedented challenges for the Caribbean region, as islands in the archipelago battle two extremes: stronger storms and hurricanes, and sweltering heat waves, both becoming increasingly regular. The effects are keenly understood here in the USVI, where seven years after the devastating impact of Hurricanes Irma and Maria, the territory is still far from a complete recovery.

?According to the V.I. Dept. of Education, it could take another seven to ten years for the rehabilitation and rebuilding of schools across both districts. But are the new, modern school designs built with hurricane resilience in mind? That was the line of questioning put to Education Commissioner Dionne Wells-Hedrington by Senator Franklin Johnson during a Committee of Disaster Recovery, Infrastructure, and Planning meeting on Monday.

The senator specifically highlighted the incorporation of one design choice that he found curious. “I’m not a builder, but I watch a lot of the drawings and I see a lot of hangovers,” noted Mr. Johnson. He recalled overhangs being cut off to “strengthen homes” in preparation for Hurricane Hugo in 1989. Again drawing on his own experiences, he shared the theory that “the less hangover, the more secure roofs are,” and sought clarity from education officials.

The request for overhangs to shelter students moving about the school plant from rain and sun came from school principals, explained Chaneel Callwood, the department’s architect. To quell the senator’s concerns, Ms. Callwood affirmed that the Department is “putting measures in place so that overhangs will perform during the storms.” Those preventative measures include building the overhangs with additional steel for fortification.

According to Ms. Callwood, the plans have been approved by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, which is funding much of the school rebuilding efforts. The approval is in line with hurricane codes, taking into consideration that the USVI is in the “highest wind category.”?

On the other end of the spectrum is the battle with rising temperatures. In 2023, the Department of Education was forced to [abbreviate school hours](#) as students and faculty struggled to learn and teach through a massive heatwave. The difficult learning environment prompted students to take matters into their own hands, [staging protests](#) that prompted a response from the governor.

Fearful that a similar situation may re-occur in 2024, Senator Novelle Francis questioned Mrs. Wells-Hedrington on preparatory efforts. Her response spotlighted the Eulalie Rivera K-8 school, described as the institution that “really suffers the most in the St. Croix district.” She reported that a scope of work for electrical upgrades at that school is already out for solicitation. Equipment, including air conditioners, is already in the territory. “It’s just a matter of all those things being taken care of so that the installation can be effective,” she remarked.

At other sites, air conditioning repairs and maintenance during the summer months are under consideration. However, the commissioner noted that one school – St. Croix Educational Complex – does not have the needed infrastructure to handle the upgrades. As such, Complex buildings will “not be retrofitted with [air conditioning units] for the entire campus for the new school year,” Mrs. Wells-Hedrington disclosed. The school will therefore be of “central focus” for the department, she said, as the department continues to press on with school repairs and replacements – funding constraints and deadlines top of mind.