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AECOM Says it's Not Responsible for Issues at Arthur A. Richards School; Claims Foul Odor Caused by Lack of Maintenance

Education / **Published On March 03, 2020 05:44 AM /**

Staff Consortium **March 03, 2020**

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Modular classrooms at the Arthur A. Richards K-8 School. By. THE VIRGIN ISLANDS DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

ST. CROIX — AECOM, a firm hired by the Government of the Virgin Islands to perform major work across the territory, including the building of modular units for schools following Hurricanes Irma and Maria, said in a statement provided to the Consortium on Monday that it is not responsible for the foul odor at the Arthur A. Richards K-8 School that forced the closure of the facility, and has led to [double session at the Eulalie Rivera K-8 School.](#)

The statement follows a Consortium report on a meeting at Arthur A. Richards on Friday, [where teachers shared stories](#) of holding classes outside, falling ill and even passing out because of the odor, which they say have permeated the modular units for at least five months. One teacher, wearing a mask, pleaded with the Dept. of Education to rectify the matter.

D.O.E. chief operation officer Dione Wells-Hedrington, said while the department would move expeditiously in its effort to get to the root of the problem, the cost for any fix would fall on the Department of Education, as a one-year warranty with AECOM had expired.

Senator Kurt Vialet, who was present at the meeting, immediately bucked at the remark. "The federal government, through the Department of Education, etc, we have paid \$97 million for modulars, and AECOM has billed this government for an additional \$100 million-plus that is being contended right now. It is not the Department of Education's responsibility for units that were installed here that are defective. We need to file with the Attorney General a case against AECOM for brining defective units to the Virgin Islands," Mr. Vialet said.

In its statement, AECOM contended that it was no longer responsible for issues at the school, and that it's own assessment revealed that the problems were caused by a lack of maintenance. The company said a certificate of occupancy for the Arthur A. Richards K-8 School (at the time Arthur A. Richards Junior High School) was issued to the school and the V.I. Department of Education on January 31, 2019. "This officially handed over ownership, operations and maintenance responsibilities to the district and school administrators. The one-year warranty for these modular classrooms went into effect on February 1, 2019 and expired on January 31, 2020," AECOM said.

The firm said its review of the current circumstances at the school "indicate they are likely the result of a lapse in conducting routine operations and maintenance required and necessary for the optimal efficiency of classroom equipment including the required washing and drying of air handling filters to correct or improve many of the issues currently being experienced. [And] the trimming of weeds and other vegetation around or near the equipment to help mitigate and improve the issue."

AECOM said it was required and did perform operations and maintenance training for these classroom facilities as well as on-site training with D.O.E. maintenance staff, "so that school facilities could continue to function properly following the hand-off of facilities to the Department of Education."

"To mitigate disruptions like this in the future, AECOM will offer reminders to the Department of Education and school administrators about the importance of conducting routine maintenance in order to keep their facilities operating as efficiently as possible," AECOM said.

Yet even as AECOM appears to blame the government for the problem by claiming lack of maintenance, Governor Albert Bryan appeared to be in no rush to fight the company on its claims. Instead, Mr. Bryan said his administration would move forward with fixing the school, and seek recompense from AECOM later if necessary.

"Yes, of course, we want to get back our money and make sure that it's done properly; we spent a lot of money on that. But the priority is making sure that our students and our teachers are safe, and making sure that they could get their education," Mr. Bryan said.