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Meeting Between Dept. of Education and PTO Planned Following Falling Ceiling Fan Incident

After a ceiling fan injured a student at the St. Croix Educational Complex, the Department of Education schedules a meeting with the PTO to address safety concerns and unresolved infrastructure issues

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Students protest learning conditions following ceiling fan incident at the St. Croix Educational Complex. By. ERNICE GILBERT, V.I. CONSORTIUM

The V.I. Dept. of Education has acknowledged the concerns raised by students at the St. Croix Educational Complex, following a protest on Friday, September 6. In response to the demonstration, the department is planning a meeting with the Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) to address the ongoing safety and maintenance issues at the school.

The meeting, initially requested by the PTO, is scheduled for Tuesday, September 10, after a brief postponement due to a scheduled Senate hearing.

The acknowledgment and planned PTO meeting follow a protest on Friday by 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th graders of the Complex High School after one of their peers was badly injured by a falling ceiling fan, which required medical attention. The incident occurred on Thursday, September 5, when a ceiling fan dislodged from the ceiling and fell, cutting a student and leaving a deep gash on his side. Students, outraged by the incident, lined the roadside outside the school to demand immediate action from school authorities.

“The fan started to spin fast and it just dropped out of the ceiling,” one student recounted, describing the dangerous situation inside the classroom. “The cut was big, and very nasty-looking,” another student said, expressing concern about the severity of the injury. The injured student was rushed for medical treatment.

The protest not only highlighted the ceiling fan incident but also broader concerns about deteriorating infrastructure at the school. Students expressed frustration with what they felt was an attempt by officials to downplay the seriousness of the situation. “They telling us in the office that it’s not that much, it’s fine,” one protester said. “Ceiling [fans] are dropping, what do you mean? What if it was his neck?”

Students also pointed to other alarming issues, such as ceiling fans being secured with electrical tape in classrooms and incomplete repairs to windows and other facilities. “There are fans taped to the ceiling in French class,” exclaimed one student, an assertion that was supported by others.

During the protest, Board of Education member Terrence Joseph passed by and assured the students that their concerns would be addressed. This follows a Board of Education walkthrough on August 2, which revealed that only a fraction of the necessary repairs had been made. According to the board's report, only about a quarter of the 2000 window operators slated for replacement had been installed, and just half of the needed 150 ceiling fans had been replaced. The report also identified malfunctioning downspouts and long-overdue fire alarm checks as critical issues.

In response to the students' demonstration, St. Croix Insular Superintendent Dr. Sharlene Belton-Gonzalez engaged directly with the protestors, commending their peaceful and constructive approach. "The students have taken a bold and courageous step in asking to be heard, and we are here to listen," Dr. Gonzalez said. She emphasized the importance of student voices in creating a positive learning environment and affirmed that the department is committed to addressing the concerns raised.

Commissioner Dionne Wells-Hedrington echoed this sentiment, stating that the department is fully committed to collaborating with the PTO and other stakeholders to resolve the issues at the school. “We value the collaboration with the PTO and are dedicated to addressing the concerns of our students and their families. We remain committed to open dialogue and to finding solutions that meet the needs of our school communities,” she said.

In addition to addressing the infrastructural issues at the St. Croix Educational Complex, the VIDE said it is actively investigating the ceiling fan incident and continues to monitor the recovery of the injured student.