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V.I. Board of Education Criticizes Lack of Urgency in Addressing School Infrastructure Issue

Board members express frustration with auxiliary agencies and education officials over ongoing problems like year-long air conditioning failures.

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The kitchen at the Eulalie Rivera Elementary School is out of commission due to a delayed rehabilitation process By. ERNICE GILBERT, V.I. CONSORTIUM

The V.I. Board of Education expressed concern during a Saturday meeting that auxiliary agencies are not doing enough to ensure that issues with school systems and infrastructure are appropriately flagged. However, one board member expressed that the issue really lies with the lack of responsiveness by education officials.?

“Those agencies are supposed to also walk through the schools, etc, and they’re supposed to provide citations,” said board member Winona Hendricks during the meeting. “There’s no way that a school could be without air conditioning for one year in a kitchen...the health department has not provided a citation or explanation, Fire[Service] has not,” she continued. She called for the board to obtain access to “a copy of the opening of school reports for some or all of the auxiliary agencies.”

?The discussion arose out of [recent incidents](#) which highlighted the lack of adequate facilities to ensure smooth operations in the territory’s public schools. Problems with the lack of air conditioning in school kitchens have been reported at the St. Croix Educational Complex and the Lockhart K-8 school. The kitchen at the Eulalie Rivera Elementary School is out of commission due to a delayed rehabilitation process. Ms. Hendricks also indicated unspecified issues at the Joseph A. Gomez Elementary School that the board needed to probe.?

While board members provided some credit to Department of Education Commission Dionne Wells-Hedrington for the video update provided on Thursday regarding Lockart K-8, the consensus was that a formal inquiry be sent to officials including the commissioner, since “the Bureau of Construction isn’t structured to respond to anything right now,” as Arah Lockhart put it.

Apart from current poor infrastructural conditions and the lackluster performance of auxiliary agencies in flagging major health and safety issues in schools, board member Shawna Richards examined the issue from a different perspective. She questioned why, despite knowing of the problems plaguing the schools, officials still pressed ahead with reopening at the beginning of the school year. “These reports don’t make one bit of difference in the politics of our environment,” she declared. “Decisions were made to continue with that...opening date, despite clear indicators in both districts that the schools were not ready.”

Ms. Richards noted that this was not a problem that had recently cropped up. “This board has seen that happen year after year after year,” she noted. The auxiliary agencies can only do so much, Ms. Richard contended. “While they may very well be doing their jobs in identifying those deficiencies, at the end of the day it becomes a very performative process if the administration, educational leadership etc. are going to continue with meeting the set start dates for school despite all indicators that they should not.”?

Whether the Board of Education could exert its influence to address the issue identified by Ms. Richards, was not discussed, as board chair Kyza Callwood immediately moved the discussion along to the meeting’s next agenda item.