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Education Commissioner to Teachers: “Just Call Us” as Protests Expose Serious School Maintenance Failures

Lockhart K-8 protests over nonfunctional air conditioning draws pledge from officials to address infrastructural issues across territory schools

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Lockhart K-8 School. By. IMAGE CREDIT: WTJX

Education Commissioner Dionne Wells-Hedrington is calling on unionized teachers to improve communication with the Department of Education regarding ongoing issues within the territory’s public schools.

During a recent discussion, she said that one of the department's major challenges is a lack of "open communication," and called on teachers to reach out with concerns. "Hey, just call us," she said, referring to teacher, noting that while department officials may not be frequently present on school campuses, once concerns are communicated, they can mobilize staff to address them.

Her comments followed protests by kitchen staff and students at Lockhart K-8 school on Thursday morning, prompted by nonfunctional air conditioning units in common spaces. VIDE responded with a video statement issued the same day to address the concerns.

Standing alongside Craig Benjamin, director of the Bureau of School Construction and Maintenance, and Dr. Stefan Jurgen, Insular Superintendent for the St. Thomas-St. John school district, Ms. Wells-Hedrington reassured the public that efforts to resolve the issues were already underway. "One of the good things about the cafeteria area is that that unit has already been purchased," she said, adding that installation would take place within two weeks. Other problem areas, she noted, "are being addressed," with repeated concerns receiving particular attention from officials. However, she cautioned that resolving all infrastructural issues would "take some time."

Craig Benjamin reinforced this, stating that "we are going to address all the issues" at Lockhart K-8, a message aimed at calming tensions after the protest highlighted long-standing frustrations over the poor conditions at the facility.

Despite assurances from officials, the situation at Lockhart is not an isolated one. The previous day, kitchen staff at Joseph A. Gomez Elementary School also staged a protest over working conditions, particularly the lack of functional air conditioning. Staff have reported suffering through oppressive heat for at least three months, with little to no response from the authorities despite multiple reports. In a troubling incident, one worker fainted due to the unbearable conditions, exacerbated by windows sealed with acrylic sheets, further restricting ventilation, according to a WTJX report.

Maintenance crews were finally dispatched to the Gomez school on Wednesday afternoon, but only after public pressure from the protesting workers. The situation has drawn attention to the broader issue of inadequate maintenance and delayed responses to critical infrastructural concerns within the territory's schools.