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Mold Forces Students Outdoors at John H. Woodson; VIDE Closes School for Deep Cleaning

Students and teachers left their classrooms Thursday due to worsening mold issues, prompting the Department of Education to close the school Friday for deep cleaning as the Bureau of School Maintenance launches remediation efforts.

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John H. Woodson Jr. High School students abandoned their classes on Thursday due to mold and maintenance issues, seeking refuge outdoors. By. ERNICE GILBERT, V.I. CONSORTIUM

Students and teachers of the John H Woodson Jr. High School abandoned their classrooms in favor of the fresh air outdoors on Thursday, fed up with mold and other maintenance-related

issues at the facility. The school, which reopened for instruction last year after [months of closure](#) due to flood damage, is once again not fit for learning, the frustrated inhabitants say.

While faculty, staff and students were reluctant to speak on the record, the Consortium learned that apart from mold infestations affecting several classrooms, internet connectivity across campus is poor, affecting students' and teachers' ability to effectively function.

Senator Kurt Vialet, chair of the 36th Legislature's Committee on Education and Workforce Development, made his way to the school when he heard that its inhabitants were outside. "I had a chance to speak to the Commissioner [of Education], and also had a chance to speak to Craig Benjamin," Senator Vialet said, referring to the director of the Bureau of School Construction. "He has assured me that they're going to be sending a team, hopefully this weekend, to deep clean those classrooms that are severely affected by the mold."

The lawmaker said that the information he received suggested that 13 of the 40-odd classrooms at John H. Woodson were affected. He urged authorities to develop a long term plan to keep mold at bay. "I'm thinking maybe every five or six months, they come in and they do a thorough cleaning."

At next week's meeting of the Senate Education Committee, the chair promised, Education Commissioner Dionne Wells-Hedrington and Mr. Benjamin will be present to field questions about how the Department of Education and the Bureau of School Maintenance are addressing the scheduling of routine and preventative maintenance in the territory's schools.

The two agency leaders have also been asked to present lawmakers with their plans for repairs and maintenance over the summer period, "where as soon as school is over, the maintenance teams are in the building doing the necessary work to be able to get those classrooms ready for the next school year," Senator Vialet said.

The lawmaker said that committee members are also expecting a "full report" on how officials plan to deal with the severe heat affecting learning at the St. Croix Educational Complex, St. Croix Central High School, and Eulalie Riviera K-8 School.

Senator Vialet also questioned why there was not yet a comprehensive plan for regular maintenance operations, with Mr. Benjamin having been on the job for [more than six months at this point](#). He expressed concern that the division of responsibilities between the Department and the Bureau may have lead to more inefficiencies when it comes to getting things done. "There's a separation that I see in responsibility," the lawmaker remarked. "The commissioner is not over the Bureau. The Bureau falls under the Office of the Governor, so the commissioner can't even tell him that 'you need to do this.'"

Notwithstanding the organizational structure of the two agencies, Mr. Vialet was resolute that the students and teachers of the territory deserve better from their education officials. "We expect you to be proactive and not reactive," he declared.

In response to the Consortium's reporting on the matter, a press release from Mr. Benjamin issued Thursday afternoon claimed that "the Bureau has taken proactive measures to address the issue." Proactive, according to the dictionary definition of the word, suggests that preemptive action is taken prior to an issue arising. However, the release goes on to say that classroom deep cleaning would only begin once school has closed for the day. The contractor hired would "continue cleaning over the weekend." Following the deep cleaning exercise, "mold testing will follow and

remediation will be completed on rooms that show a positive sign on mold,” the press release stated.

Mr. Benjamin's announcement also stated that a new work order request system has been implemented which allows “school principals to submit work orders and emergency requests directly to our team.” This system, said the press release, “streamlines the process for addressing maintenance concerns in real-time, ensuring that we can act quickly and efficiently to resolve issues as they arise.” The Bureau has promised to “work diligently to resolve any remaining issues and to prevent further occurrences of mold in our schools.”

The Department of Education, meanwhile, has decided that the John H. Woodson Jr. High School will be closed on Friday to allow for deep cleaning and mold testing.

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