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VIDE Headquarters Fire Spurs Relief and Alarm as Server Room Narrowly Spared

A Thursday fire at VIDE headquarters was contained to a storage area and restroom, narrowly missing the server room that connects St. Thomas/St. John schools. Officials say cloud backup and stronger protections are now under urgent review.

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Education Commissioner Dionne Wells-Hedrington speaks to lawmakers after a fire at VIDE headquarters narrowly missed the critical server room. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE.

The V.I. Department of Education's leadership is breathing a sigh of relief as Thursday's fire at its headquarters did not affect the server room. Had it done so, schools in the St. Thomas/St. John district would have been without critical internet connectivity.

An update on the fire was provided by Education Commissioner Dionne Wells-Hedrington when she appeared before the Committee on Education and Workforce Development on Friday. The fire was largely contained to an equipment storage room, and was “more in the roof, and so it did not escalate to the floor, which was better for us,” said Dr. Wells-Hedrington. The flames did, however, spread to an adjacent ladies' restroom.

The incident “could have been a lot, lot worse,” the commissioner remarked. Had the fire spread in the opposite direction, the server room would have been in its direct path. Notwithstanding the minimal damage caused, the fire has prompted VIDE to consider stronger protection for its assets. According to Wells-Hedrington, conversations are ongoing with One Communication (formerly Viya) to explore “cloud backup” for the department’s system.

“That is not a good place that we're in, and so we are going to explore that this coming week,” she told lawmakers.

The V.I. Fire and Emergency Management Service is currently investigating the fire and has not yet given the all-clear to enter the room. Senator Kurt Vialet was wary that the fire-damaged roof could be further compromised by rainfall and subsequently affect the server room. Ms. Wells-Hedrington assured him that the Bureau of School Construction and Maintenance would soon be on the job. “Once we get all cleared, then Mr. Benjamin will takeover,” she said.

Although the department awaits the official report from VIFEMS, a fire marshal has already informed VIDE that the fire suppression units near the flames “were expired.” She shared that detail in response to questions from Senator Avery Lewis, who wondered if such units were available. “God bless that that particular area was saved, because we would have had more chaos in the Department.”

Aware that funding is an “issue”, he still encouraged VIDE to “see how we could harden those areas and make it more safe...and fire retardant.” Per Ms. Wells-Hedrington, VIFEMS’ report will be “very specific about the things that we need to do in order to make sure that that does not happen again.”