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Woodson Junior High to Shut Down, VIDE Confirms, as Problems Persist Even After \$5M in Remediation and Roof Repairs

Education officials say John H. Woodson Junior High can no longer be sustained as a school, despite roughly \$5 million spent on mold remediation and roof work, because water continues rising through the foundation and health complaints persist.

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The John H. Woodson Jr. High School. By. V.I. CONSORTIUM.

Despite approximately \$5 million invested in “comprehensive mold remediation and roof repairs” at the John H. Woodson Junior High School, the V.I. Department of Education will close that school.

During Wednesday's meeting of the Committee on Education and Workforce Development, the executive director of the Bureau of School Construction and Maintenance shared that a recent walk through at the school yielded positive results. "Previously damp grassy areas and walls, once affected by persistent leaks and covered with moss, have significantly dried out," Craig Benjamin said. Indoor air quality has also "notably improved because of deep cleaning the air conditioning units", complemented by roof repairs.

But in the testimony of the Department of Education, Commissioner Dionne Wells-Hedrington noted that the school, built in 1982, has "weathered many storms and challenges, and at this time can no longer be used or sustained as a school."

The differing testimonies confused Senator Kenneth Gittens, who sought clarity.

"It was driven by the fact that we keep pouring into a school that has demonstrated that it needs mitigation in order for those air quality issues to be addressed," Commissioner Wells-Hedrington explained. "So it's good for today, but it's no guarantee that it would be good for tomorrow."

Carla Bastien-Knight, the superintendent for the St. Croix district, presented a financial perspective. The \$5 million spent on mold remediation far surpasses the \$2.5 million summer maintenance budget. "It leaves us to question if we could continue to maintain John H. Woodson at \$5 million for the mold remediation that's needed to keep that campus open," she wondered.

Bastien-Knight reminded the committee that the mold related challenges at John H. Woodson are not new. "We've been there from John de Jongh's administration, and we're still here today," she said, speaking from her 15 years of experience at Woodson. "Every time it rains, the water table rises. It's dry today, but tomorrow, if we have torrential downpour, our water table is going to rise again and we're going to have the flooding and the mold of the classroom," Ms. Bastien-Knight stated.

Though she agreed that the work done at the start of the school year was "great," the bigger question was "can we really sustain it?"

Committee chair Senator Kurt Vialet could not imagine that VIDE or BSCM would have to expend \$5 million on more remediation work, as roof repairs were already completed. Ms. Bastien-Knight, however, revealed that water is still "coming up through the foundation."

"We continue to still receive complaints about health challenges from our parents, our students and our staff," the superintendent shared. "They call our office as they exit because they have to go to the hospital because they're ill. So something still exists in the school."

With VIDE's mind made up, Senator Vialet expressed his hope that the school would not become a "dump site" like other shuttered schools. "We abandoning government, building schools, and then they're just becoming an eyesore," he lamented.

Commissioner Wells-Hedrington indicated that there are plans to transform the building into a "discovery center, like a CTE hub for our middle school students." She informed Senator Gittens that a significant amount of "mitigation work" would still be necessary, however, before the facility could be repurposed.