

The Virgin Islands Consortium

SCEC Opening Could Be Delayed as VIBE Flags Leaks, Mold and Brown Water Across Schools; BCSM Says It Has No Money

SCEC faces roof leaks, mold and water near electrical wiring; Bowsky has closed modular rooms amid mold and AC repairs; Eulalie Rivera has brown water and restroom issues; Juanita Gardine has flooding; Lockhart classrooms will open without floor tiles.

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The health and gym area at St. Croix Educational Complex, where damaged ceilings and exposed infrastructure were among conditions raising safety concerns as officials worked to determine whether the school was ready to reopen.

Days before students are scheduled to return to classrooms, the Virgin Islands Board of Education is questioning whether several campuses will be ready, after recent walkthroughs identified leaking roofs and water near electrical wiring at the St. Croix Educational Complex, mold and unusable spaces, brown water flowing from faucets at Eulalie Rivera K-8 and other unfinished repairs.

A final decision on whether the St. Croix Educational Complex should delay its opening is expected by midday Saturday following another campus assessment. Meanwhile, the Bureau of School Construction and Maintenance says it has exhausted available funds, cannot make major purchases until the new fiscal year begins in October and has depleted lines of credit with several suppliers.

The conditions dominated an emergency VIBE meeting Friday, where board members questioned representatives of the Department of Education and BCSM about the readiness of schools across the territory.

Water, Electrical Concerns at St. Croix Educational Complex

The St. Croix Educational Complex drew some of the strongest concerns.

Board member Winona Hendricks said a leaking roof in the gymnasium creates large puddles near the locker rooms.

"Also the rain affects the electrical connectivity," she said, explaining that water is falling onto electrical and networking wires.

"That is a crisis. We cannot have students going into that area of the building under those particular conditions."

Hendricks also cited problems in the band room, library and kitchen, including termite infestation, mold and ventilation concerns.

"If these things cannot be addressed in a manner where the students are going to be safe...then I would suggest that maybe the opening of that school needs to be delayed at least for a few days," she said.

Education and BCSM officials said they believe the school may still be able to open as scheduled, with crews working through the weekend on the most urgent repairs.

"I think we will survive," said St. Croix Superintendent of Education Carla Bastian-Knight.

Teachers whose regular spaces have become completely unusable have been temporarily moved elsewhere.

"While we don't expect our teachers to be too happy, there's a place that has been identified and provided for them at this time."

Bastian-Knight acknowledged that the outcome depends heavily on the work scheduled for the weekend.

"We'll just wait to see and cross our fingers that what's supposed to be completed this weekend will be done," she told the board.

The final assessment is expected to determine whether the school will open Monday or whether a brief delay will be necessary.

Some board members were considerably less optimistic.

“That school won’t be ready on Monday, we know this,” said board member Abigail Hendricks-Cagan. “Let’s call the thing a thing. This school will not be ready.”

Some Bowsky Classrooms to Remain Closed

Several modular classrooms at Yvonne Milliner-Bowsky Elementary School will remain closed because of their condition.

Mold remediation and air-conditioning repair work is continuing over the weekend, while Education officials and Board of Education members expressed different views about whether the campus as a whole will be ready.

According to Dr. Jurgen, “I don’t see any reason why” the school “shouldn’t open on Monday.”

VIBE Chairman Kyza Callwood expressed doubt that the school would be fully ready.

Brown Water Reported at Eualie Rivera

BCSM crews are also making urgent repairs at Eualie Rivera K-8 after board members said they observed brown water coming from faucets during their walkthrough.

Some restrooms also lacked sink faucets.

“The bathrooms are terrible for boys and also for girls,” Hendricks said.

Raised cistern covers outside the building were also identified as trip hazards.

“That school is a crisis as well,” Callwood said.

Bobby Ferris, School Facilities Maintenance Assistant Management at BCSM, said workers were “demoing some faucets from somewhere else” to provide an interim solution.

“That’ll be taken care of hopefully before Monday,” he said.

The board also raised concerns at Juanita Gardine K-8, where flooding was reported in bathrooms and the kitchen.

Seven Lockhart Classrooms to Open Without Florr Tiles

On St. Thomas, seven modular classrooms at Lockhart K-8 that were gutted during remediation of longstanding mold problems are expected to open Monday.

“Those classrooms should be ready over the weekend,” said St. Thomas Superintendent of Education Stean Jurgen.

The rooms will not be entirely finished because the needed floor tiles are not yet available. Officials have decided to use the classrooms in their current condition until the flooring can be installed.

By Sunday, “they should have those seven classrooms to the point where the walls will be painted. The air conditioners, for the most part, will be fixed,” said Paul Harrigan, BCSM assistant director of school maintenance.

Once the tiles become available, installation will take place “throughout the school year on weekends or in the afternoons,” Harrigan said.

BCSM Says it Is "Operating on Fumes"

Underlying the school-readiness problems is a significant funding shortage at the Bureau of School Construction and Maintenance.

Executive Director Craig Benjamin told the board that BCSM was “currently operating on fumes” and cannot make major expenditures until the new fiscal year begins in October.

“We’re in a negative environment, negative balance on our sheets right now,” Benjamin said.

“We’re in a situation where we have no money,” he added.

BCSM has also exhausted lines of credit with several suppliers, leaving the bureau unable to purchase some basic materials.

The funding shortage has prevented BCSM from purchasing fuel for emergency backup generators at schools.

Benjamin said fueling a single generator can cost as much as \$10,000. The bureau has already spent nearly \$100,000 on generator fuel during previous power emergencies and cannot absorb additional costs.

“There is no funding available to address a lot of these simple things,” Benjamin told the board.

He said BCSM previously asked the Legislature for \$3 million but received no assistance.

“We asked for assistance and we didn’t get assistance,” he said.

Weekend Deadline Set

Before concluding Friday’s emergency meeting, VIBE established deadlines intended to give the public a clearer picture of school readiness before Monday.

In addition to the midday Saturday decision on whether the St. Croix Educational Complex will open as scheduled, BCSM must provide the board with a comprehensive report by noon Sunday detailing the repairs completed across the territory during the weekend.

The board said the goal is to ensure families know the condition and readiness of each school before students are sent back to campus Monday.

