

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Mold Problem Persisted At Henderson School For Years, Parents Say

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Most of St. Croix's schools are old and for years the Government of the Virgin Islands, instead of fixing the aging buildings and ensuring maintenance was kept up, has allowed small, easily-sorted problems to become jobs requiring sometimes hundreds of thousands of dollars.

That's according to Sen. Kurt Violet, the top vote-getter in the St. Croix District Senate race during the 2014 elections and a longtime St. Croix educator.

Violet spoke to *VI Consortium* on Wednesday evening at the Croix Educational Complex concerning the health hazards at Alexander Henderson Elementary School stemming

from the presence of mold and fiberglass.

In addition to the senator, parents and concerned residents also expressed their frustrations with the Henderson matter, saying why they believe education hasn't been a top priority for the V.I. government for years.

"[It's been happening] since I've been going to school, and I'm 26 now," a mother, who attended Alexander Henderson said in reference to the mold issue that has shuttered the school for three weeks.

The woman continued: "I was going there since I've been in 2nd grade, and this mold issue has been a problem. But you mean to tell me, this little bit of rain happened and caused this fiberglass situation? Okay, that could have happened, but the mold issue is a big thing going on here. Now, for them to say that they're going to wipe off everything? Mold is a serious situation, and if they couldn't do it in the last couple of years, how are they going to do it in fifteen days?"

"And then, [Assistant Commissioner Charmaine Hobson-Johnson] said it's a transition for the children and it's an experience. [Well] this is not a situation they need to be experiencing now, when they're supposed to be moving to the next level. So, if some of these children start failing in their work, you mean to tell me that they're going to stay back because the transition didn't work well with them? That's not right."

The mother also worried about the safety of the children, as she questioned whether the monitors, already lacking in numbers, would be able to control the crowds.

"There's only two monitors at Henderson. Two people for all of these children? So just imagine now, the students of Henderson having the same lunch time as those at Eulalie Rivera Elementary School."

The mother was referring to students from Henderson Elementary who will be attending Eulalie Rivera while a contractor works to free Henderson of mold and fiberglass over the next three weeks.

Henderson students were dispersed to different schools across St. Croix. Students in Kindergarten, 1st and 2nd Grades will be placed at Eulalie R. Rivera, known as Grove Place school; students in 3rd and 5th Grades will be placed at Charles H. Emmanuel; students in 4th Grade, will be placed at Claude O. Markoe Elementary School; and those in 6th Grade, or enrolled in a gifted or talented class will be placed at Authur A. Richards Junior High School.

The mother went on: "That's next to Grove Place -- I'm not saying it in a bad way, but you understand what I'm saying. All these kids having lunch together, how many monitors are going to be down there watching all of these children? Who knows if these kids are going to be bullied? You never know."

A school counselor, during the same conversation, told *VI Consortium* that, "children are resilient and they will adapt. Parents need to calm their heads."

The counselor, who attended the meeting because of a nephew who attends Henderson School, sympathized with the parents' concern, however.

VI Consortium then asked the concerned mother what would she recommend be done with Henderson.

"I think that, honestly, that mold issue has been going on for years. Just the same way how they closed Patrick Sweeney Police Headquarters because it was infested with mold, is the same way they need to close [Henderson] and build another school.

"It's going to take some time, but the same way they had money and they find money to do certain things, they need to find money to fix these schools for the children and make them look like schools," she said.

Then, reflecting on her child's school, the woman outlined a number of other issues facing the facility.

"Henderson has no trees for the children to be under. When they're playing for recess, they have no place to sit down, they're just running around like wild children. At the same time, they are kids, but they need shade, outdoor fountains," she said, adding, "They keep talking it's about the children and it's [really] not about the children, because if it was, all of this money would have been going to the schools and this would have never been happening."

While some parents would like to see new schools erected in St. Croix, Violet said although the idea is a good one, it wouldn't fix the current problem. Instead, Violet called for consistent maintenance of the facilities.

"I heard a lot of people saying let's build a new school, but even if you were supposed to start today and say that we're going to build a new school, to get the financing, to develop plans, to get a contractor and put out an RFP, you're looking at two years down the line," he said.

"A new school is not going to go up in six or seven months if you're going to do it right," Violet added. "So a new school right now wouldn't be a solution for what we're presently going through."

He continued: "And we don't need one new school, we need multiple new schools because the facilities are aging, and there's been a lack of maintenance over the years.

"So right now I think the focus of the Department of Education must be the need to hire maintenance personnel at all schools so that small problems don't become huge problems. You have a small leak, a trickle, you don't address it, and eventually it's a river. We need that maintenance staff, on the school site, with specific directives that they are to look at, repair what they can, and what they can't, they need to contract out as quickly as possible.

"Because there are some problems that could have been fixed by spending ten or twenty thousand dollars, but we said we didn't have any money, and then we wait until it becomes a problem that's going to cost us one hundred to two hundred thousand dollars. So, we need to systematically go through all the schools and fix those areas that need to be fixed now to stop this mold growing up."

Education Commissioner-designee Sharon McCollum, PhD, who was also present at last Wednesday night's meeting, said while she wasn't acquainted with the issues at Henderson, she is aware that all the schools of St. Croix have "structural" issues.

"Henderson school is not one of the schools that I had visited," McCollum said. "I am aware of the fact that all of the schools on St. Croix have structural issues. I have been to other campuses that, from what I've been told -- you must remember that I've only been on this job several weeks -- that I felt have more pressing problems. But I am learning in my research that this has been an ongoing issue."

While Dr. McCollum admits that the work before her is "tremendous," she says she expects to address each issue one step at a time.

"I think the work is tremendous; however, my attitude about it is, how do you eat an elephant, one bite at a time," she said.