

The Virgin Islands Consortium

To Improve School Lunch Program, Education Pledges To Buy More Local Produce, Enhance Menu And Purchase New Kitchen Equipment

Health / **Published On June 24, 2015 10:19 AM /**

Staff **June 24, 2015**



Sen. Jean Forde eats with students of Gomez School

ST. CROIX – In testimony Tuesday before the Senate Committee on Education and Workforce Development chaired by Senator Jean Forde, Department of Education Commissioner Dr. Sharon McCollum and other Education officials reaffirmed their commitment to address the maintenance needs of the Territory's public schools, noted plans to enhance the School Lunch Program and expressed their intent to ensure strong administrator leadership across the Department's schools.

The hearing before the committee follows reports of [stale and moldy meals](#) being served at the territory's local schools. Forde had pledged to hold a hearing on the matter to get a sense of how DOE planned on rectifying the problem.

Commissioner McCollum addressed the closing of two St. Croix District schools next school year, noting that plans are in place for the bussing of affected students to already-identified schools. In May, the Department announced that Elena Christian Jr. High and Evelyn M. Williams Elementary schools would close during the 2015-16 school year to undergo extensive repairs. When asked by Committee members whether demolition of the schools was a consideration, Commissioner McCollum said a final decision would be made on the schools' status once student populations are assessed at the start of the 2015-16 school year and discussions take place about the Department's fiscal ability to rebuild new schools.

Commissioner McCollum's testimony comes one day after she and education officials on St. Croix hosted a walk through tour of four schools on June 22 with members of the 31st Legislature and Mapp Administration officials. A slideshow presentation to the group also showcased the critical maintenance needs of the island's 15 public schools and offered a call for financial help to meet those needs.

Freshman St. Croix Senator Novelle Francis pledged his support of the Education Department.

"Going on the tour yesterday was an eye-opener for me and I have decided to do whatever it takes to prioritize education," he said at Tuesday's hearing.

Representatives from the Department's School Lunch Program also testified that discussions are underway about sourcing greater amounts of produce from local farmers in an effort to provide fresher, more nutritious food options to students. In addition, student cafeteria committees are expected to be formed in schools across the territory to offer student input on menu items. Furthermore, Education officials say steps have been made to purchase new kitchen equipment and foster overall improvement of the School Lunch Program.

Dionne Wells-Hedrington, Insular Superintendent of the St. Thomas-St. John District, said the recent changes in administration at Charlotte Amalie High School with the reassignment of Principal Stefan Jorgen to head Ivanna Eudora Kean High School in the 2015-16 school year is an example of the Department's strategy to "create good leadership teams" across all of its schools. Jorgen's replacement at CAHS will be veteran administrator Alcede Edwards, who has served as an assistant principal at the high school for almost two decades. Sally Petty, current acting principal at Eudora Kean, will vacate her position to go on military leave.

In her closing remarks, Commissioner McCollum said, "I think we have demonstrated today the commitment we have to our children and to public education. We embrace all members of our community becoming involved in the education of our children."

Feature Image: Sen. Jean Forde eats with students of Joseph Gomez Elementary School.

