

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Twenty-Four Teachers Skip Work At Central School In Protest Of Broken AC Unit In Special Needs Classroom, Other Grievances

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ST. CROIX -- Twenty-four Central High School teachers did not show up to school on Thursday, sources with direct knowledge of the matter have confirmed to The Consortium. The information was subsequently corroborated by the Department of Education's Director of Public Relations and Communications, Cynthia Graham.

But the school barred the media from investigating the matter, ordering its security guard to turn away all media personnel without giving an explanation for its action. Yet, sources on the campus said two rooms -- the cafeteria and library -- were converted into

makeshift studies and were overwhelmed with "hundreds" of students who could not attend class because of the teachers' seemingly strategic move to skip work.

Throughout the day and as the news continued to spread, parents could be seen driving to the school grounds to pick up their children. According to Ms. Graham, there are 82 teachers at Central High School. With 24 not showing up, it left the institution severely handicapped with 58 teachers.

Of the 24 teachers who skipped school on Thursday, 2 reported to work and signed out, while the remaining 22 educators called out for the day, according to Ms. Graham, who said the information was relayed to her by Colleen Williams, superintendent for the St. Croix District.

There were reports of an AC Unit that had been broken at the school in a classroom and hadn't been fixed. Central High School's Parent Teacher Student Association's President, Daren Stevens, said to The Consortium this morning that he was told the classroom affected is one where special needs students learn, and the hot room, aside from making it difficult for teachers to do their work and for students to concentrate, was also destroying the computers.

But a teacher who spoke to The Consortium on the condition of anonymity to speak freely on the matter, said teachers have been mistreated by the Government of the Virgin Islands in regards to their salaries, and the money deducted from the paychecks every fortnight. Coupled with the fact that teachers haven't received a raise in the territory for multiple years -- even after contracts were negotiated between 2009-2010 -- local educators have either [left the territory for better-paying](#) jurisdictions, or quit the field altogether.

The head of Human Resources at the Department of Education, Nicole Jacobs, [revealed](#) to The Consortium in August that over 70 teachers had either resigned or retired from the DOE since June. Jacobs also confirmed that the department had been receiving resignations through emails for the entirety of the week beginning August 10, 2015 at an alarming rate.

"The St. Croix district is not clear why the absences occurred today," Ms. Graham said. "But students that were affected by the teachers being absent were assembled in the library and cafeteria. And because Alfredo Andrews had an early dismissal, the support staff there was able to come to the school to assist."

Graham said DOE was not sure why the teachers didn't show up to teach; and said the department would abstain from drawing conclusions. A meeting DOE Commissioner Sharon McCollum arranged with American Federation of Teachers' head Rosa Soto-Thomas, fell through as Soto-Thomas did not attend. Ms. Graham also did not know if the teachers would report to work today, however provisions were made to help allay the school in case there was a repeat of Thursday's action.

But the contingencies that Ms. Graham was referring to include repeating the same strategy that was employed yesterday -- rerouting Alfredo Andrews Elementary School's support staff to Central High -- to help keep the students occupied in the makeshift spaces with reading and other activities, as the elementary school [remains closed today](#).

But they won't be able to teach the 9 to 12-graders, posing a difficulty for the department.

Sources told The Consortium that the teachers would report to work today, however the publication was unable to confirm the information because it was not able to gather enough teacher sources who held the same stance.

And the AFT, the union representing teachers, did not sanction Thursday's action. Mr. Stevens, who said yesterday's occurrence was vexing because the institution's back to school open house event held the night prior, where DOE officials, as well as teachers and parents gathered to voice concerns, saw encouraging participation. But if the teachers held any grievances, they were not expressed at the event.

Yet, people familiar with such actions said they are usually planned in advance without giving notice.

It remains to be seen whether the teachers will show up to school today, or if the one-off occurrence becomes a major problem for DOE.