

The Virgin Islands Consortium

In 2017 Budget, Mapp Includes Repair Funds For Three Schools

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ST. CROIX -- In February, the Department of Education [had no idea](#) what would become of Elena Christian Junior High or Evelyn M. Williams Elementary schools, two facilities shuttered by the government because they are badly in need of repair. The department said the schools are considered capital projects and D.O.E. does not have funds allocated in its budget for such work.

A recent Consortium report revealed that even as the 2016 school year comes to an end in June, construction at the original Elena Christian and Evelyn Williams schools had not started -- even as D.O.E. [repeatedly told](#) concerned parents and the media that the closures would last only one year — the 2015-16 school year — while the schools

undergo repairs of what it called “longstanding structural and environmental issues.”

“Both Elena Christian Jr. High and Evelyn M. Williams Elementary schools are considered capital projects. The Department of Education currently does not have the requisite funding to address many of its longstanding capital projects needs. When the decision was made to close Elena Christian and Evelyn Williams at the end of the 2014-15 school year following an extensive analysis of the structures, it was with the intent to repair and reopen, as our original press release stated. Commissioner McCollum and Education officials continue to look at the best course of action for both structures going forward,” reads the D.O.E. statement.

The Consortium toured the original Elena Christian grounds on in February and witnessed bushes growing on its fencing, and an aura of abandonment enveloping the facility. While there, a trucking company’s employees could be seen removing desks, chairs and other school equipment from the building. D.O.E. said the items belong to the District School Food Authority (S.F.A.) that had been stored there, and they were being moved to the new S.F.A. location in Estate Cottage.

But Governor Kenneth Mapp in his 2017 budget, plans to address the problem. He has included funds to not only repair three schools that have been shuttered on St. Croix for repairs; the governor also plans on erecting a new learning facility in St. John.

“The capital projects are intended to stimulate our recovering economy,” said Governor Kenneth Mapp in his [transmittal letter](#) to Senate President Neville James. “The capital project budget will address a number of obligations under various consent decrees including our landfills, prisons, hospitals and police department. It will fund maintenance, repairs and restoration of a number of public schools, including the shuttered Elena Christian Jr. High, the Evelyn Williams and Joseph Gomez Elementary Schools. The government has identified non-federal land to construct a new K-8 grade school on the island of St. John and the governor is requesting \$32 million to construct the new school.”

Before D.O.E. officials announced that some schools would be consolidated to allow for repairs on the dilapidated facilities, Mr. Mapp made no secret of his desire to permanently shutter some schools, contending that some needed to be merged. In May, 2015, The Consortium was told by a senator, who requested anonymity to speak freely on the matter, that the Mapp administration would shutter two elementary schools and merge two others.

Residents [had contacted](#) The Consortium, inquiring of the matter when talk of consolidation was rampant, stating that they’d heard rumblings from teachers that some schools would shutdown for repairs, while others would be altogether closed because there were not enough students to justify faculty and staff.

In February, Senator Kurt Vialet told The Consortium that Education Commissioner Sharon McCollum said in a recent meeting with senators that D.O.E. saw the Evelyn Williams building as a suitable location for the department’s headquarters. However, while Mr. Vialet agreed that there were some merits to the idea, he said more information was needed before a final decision could be made. Mr. Vialet also advocated strongly for the reopening of the original Elena Christian school, noting the extra strain on parents with students from the east side of the island, who carry their children all the way to the

Charles H. Emanuel School (Charles H. Emanuel students have merged with Alfredo Andrews Elementary School).

Asked how would the Charles H. Emanuel building be utilized if Elena Christian students were to move back to their original location after repairs, Mr. Violet said the facility could be used for government offices. He also said that a study that analyzes how government could better utilize its many vacant buildings must be conducted.

“The population of the schools have decreased,” Mr. Violet said, adding that the merger of Charles H. Emanuel and Alfredo Andrews resulted in a population of just over 400 students. “So with some of the consolidation I can see the justification, as long as we can better spend the monies that we are saving.”

Correction: May 30, 2016

Because of an editing error in the title, Joseph Gomez Elementary School, located in St. Thomas, was said to be a school located on St. Croix. The story has been updated.