

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Parents Take Their Children Home Following Reports Of Irritant At Alfredo Andrews

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ST. CROIX -- Numerous students were taken home by their parents on Thursday morning following several reports indicating that teachers, school personnel and students have been exposed to an irritant at Alfredo Andrews Elementary School which has caused severe itching of the eyes, skin and throat.

In a statement issued on Thursday, St. Croix Federation of Teachers President Rosa Soto-Thomas said reports indicated that many other persons at the school have been affected by the irritant. She said testing should take place as soon as possible to determine if the irritant was fiberglass or asbestos to ascertain what type of remediation would be necessary by the government. Furthermore, Mrs. Soto-Thomas said, school

personnel have reported that a vast amount of mold is constantly present at Alfredo Andrews because of leaky roofs and the aged structure itself.

The Department of Education late Wednesday issued a press release stating that [the aftermath of strong winds](#) had caused the closure of Alfredo Andrews on Wednesday. D.O.E. said high winds overnight on Tuesday blew leaves and particles into ducts that affected the ventilation system in the school's kitchen and cafeteria. The department said the ducts were then cleaned and sealed, and that a cleaning contractor was called into the school to thoroughly disinfect the affected areas in the cafeteria and kitchen.

But the department made no mention of a potential irritant affecting the facility in its release to the media. And in another release issued Thursday, the department failed to acknowledge the concerns raised; it only stated that school at Alfredo Andrews would resume today.

Senator Alicia Hansen, who visited the school after she received calls about the irritant, said that upon her arrival, she met parents picking up their children who stopped to show her irritated red eyes and rashes on the arms, hands and faces of students. The issue of exposure to fiberglass was one of the complaints made by parents, according to Mrs. Hansen. The senator, in questioning authorities, said she was told that the issues stemmed from the recent strong winds that lifted the vent off the roof of the St. Croix school, causing debris and what some described as the presents of fiberglass.

"I came today to see what the condition were for myself, I am highly concerned with the safety of our children and support staff at the school," Mrs. Hansen said.

She said parents were contacted by the school to have ill children picked up as children showed signs of irritation yesterday, complaining of itching and skin rashes. The senator also expressed gratitude to Ms. Colleen Mae Williams, insular superintendent of the St. Croix School District, for her quick response and willingness to assist.

Mrs. Hansen said that her visit was received with a positive approach, D.O.E. responded in a proactive manner when notified of the matter, and the superintendent had called on inspectors, as well as private companies to clean up the school.

However, on Thursday there was a fair amount of symptoms that were noticed, leading Mrs. Hansen to question whether there was a deeper health safety problem at the school. Mrs. Hansen shared some pictures, as seen above, with this publication.

Elsewhere, there were reports that the roof of the Elena Christian Junior High School had collapsed, but those turned out to be false.