

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Mapp Identifies Best Prepared And Least Prepared Schools; Says All Will Be Conducive For Learning By Sept. 5

Education / **Published On August 17, 2017 11:25 AM /**

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ST. THOMAS -- Officials of the Department of Education skipped a Senate hearing on Wednesday to instead join Governor Kenneth Mapp at a press conference here in talking up the department's efforts in preparing the territory's schools for September 5.

"Let me as governor of the Virgin Islands say that when you go into a number of the schools, of course you're going to find some issues that still require remediation," Mr. Mapp said, adding that D.O.E. Commissioner Sharon McCollum and her team have been working tirelessly to prepare the learning facilities.

Mr. Mapp announced that the government had received some \$14.6 million for school repairs, made available through federal grants and bond proceeds from the Public Finance Authority. "Of that \$14.6 million, about \$7 million is in the pipeline and work taking place on schools," the governor said.

The governor also named what D.O.E. has deemed the best prepared and least prepared public schools in the territory. The Alexander Henderson Elementary School in Federiksted was identified as the best prepared on St. Croix, while the Ivanna Eudora Kean High School was named the best prepared on St. Thomas. The Lew Muckle Elementary School on St. Croix was identified as the least prepared, while the Joseph Sibilly Elementary School on St. Thomas was deemed the least prepared.

Mr. Mapp said that new air conditioning systems were being installed at various schools on St. Croix, including the Lew Muckle Elementary School as well as the St. Croix Educational Complex and John H. Woodson Jr. High School. He did not say whether St. Thomas schools would see the same upgrades, however, D.O.E. plans on spending roughly \$866,000 on St. Thomas and \$753,000 on St. Croix during the summer in school repairs, according to information provided by D.O.E. Monies for these projects, however, came from a \$1.7 million Senate summer maintenance appropriation, but the Office of Management and Budget released the funds only two weeks ago, leaving D.O.E. officials scrambling to secure contractors to perform much-needed work.

According to the governor, even when school reopens, contractors will be working on some of the facilities. He added, "In other schools, you're going to see that maintenance work has been completed, but capital improvement projects will be ongoing."

"We're not going to find the schools in perfect order when the children arrive on Sept. 5. You're going to find the schools clean and ready to be inhabited by the children and the professional staff," Mr. Mapp said.

The governor and Lieutenant Governor Osbert Potter, will tour the territory's public schools on August 28 -- the week before school reopens -- and Mr. Mapp has asked members of the Board of Education, lawmakers and the media to join them on the tour.

The territory's leader, as he's done in the past, also spoke about the challenges facing D.O.E. and the government because the school facilities are old and are in constant need of repair. He said the most recently built schools in the territory were Bertha C. Boschulte Middle School and the Lockhart Elementary School -- both in St. Thomas -- at 17 years old. The youngest school on St. Croix, at 25 years, is the St. Croix Educational Complex. Charlotte Amalie High School in St. Thomas, built in 1920, is the oldest in the territory, while the Juanita Gardine Elementary School on St. Croix, built in the early 1950s, is the oldest on St. Croix.

The governor said he revealed the information because, "We're still trying to use some of these older buildings, and some of them are requiring structural work. But we're trying to make sure [that] the maintenance and the safety of the school plans are in order, so that the children and the teaching and professional staff can be safe, and learning can take place there."

During her brief remarks, Ms. McCollum sought to reassure parents that come Sept. 5, schools territory-wide would be ready for learning. "To all of our students and parents, we are ready, we are preparing for you and we are looking forward to a wonderful school year," she said.

Mr. Potter, also giving brief remarks, thanked D.O.E.'s maintenance team for their "ongoing hard work," revealing that he had visited some facilities, "and I know that it's a lot of work that has been done and a lot of work that continues to be done in order to make the facilities acceptable for learning," he said. Mr. Potter also urged students to do their part in the upkeep of the schools. "Take pride in your facilities and help to keep your school properly in order. Do not tear down the school; I'm saying that because it happens," he said.