

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Central High Teachers Take Walk-Out Action As Unsanitary Restroom Conditions Persist

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ST. CROIX -- Unable to cope with unsanitary conditions of restrooms at the Central High School (C.H.S.) caused by an ongoing low water pressure problem, teachers walked out of classrooms two hours after school began, which is in accordance with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) contract with the government, to protest the inaction of the Department of Education (D.O.E.) on the issue, and in an attempt to get the problem addressed.

The low water pressure problem has been on and off from 2016, said Michael Thurland, a member of AFT, chairman of the school's social studies department, and a Virgin Islands history teacher at C.H.S. The latest issue has been occurring from Thursday, "So

that means all the bathrooms used by the students have been compromised," Mr. Thurland said. He said custodial workers were bucketing water to flush the toilets, however they became overwhelmed by the strenuous task.

C.H.S. is one of three schools in the St. Croix District that are open for split session classes. It hosts C.H.S. students in the morning, and John H. Woodson and the Elena Christian Junior High school students in the afternoon. "When they come in, they have to meet that issue," Mr. Thurland said, speaking of restrooms with feces that could not be flushed because of the poor water pressure.

Mr. Thurland, who also represents AFT at the school, said he and another AFT representative spoke with the school's principal, Janasee Sinclair, about the problem. "But for several days we saw no action," Mr. Thurland said. He said Ms. Sinclair said D.O.E. looked into the matter and determined that the problem was that of the Virgin Islands Water and Power Authority. But WAPA, according to Mr. Thurland, had given different reasons for the issue -- and at one point said the problem did not lie with it.

"Finding nobody to address the situation, we know that we don't have to work in this type of environment by virtue of our union contract," Mr. Thurland said. "So therefore we are invoking our rights as AFT members to not work in this environment. And we're letting the students know that they need to make demands also to not deal with the condition of the restrooms."

He added: "Right now the restrooms are stink. They got feces and whatever else in them, because they just are not flushing adequately." Mr. Thurland along with the other AFT representative again met with Ms. Sinclair today, who assured them that WAPA would be visiting the school to address the issue.

The protesting teachers stood underneath the student drop-off structure, while the students stood immediately outside the school gate, which Mr. Thurland said may have been a way for the school to control the student population as there were no classes in session.

Rosa Soto-Thomas, president of the St. Croix Federal of Teachers, told The Consortium that she spoke with Assistant D.O.E. Commissioner Charmaine Hobson and William Mathew, D.O.E.'s St. Croix District maintenance director, and both said they were not aware of the problems. However, Ms. Soto-Thomas said she was told by AFT members at the school that both Ms. Hobson and Mr. Mathew were made aware of the issues.

"Are the schools really ready? Nobody should work in these conditions," Ms. Soto-Thomas said. She said it appears that because teachers are at the school only half a day, D.O.E. wants the educators to "wing it." But the Dept. of Education should not be allowed to "trample on the AFT contract because of the storms," Ms. Soto-Thomas said.

In a release on Wednesday afternoon, D.O.E. announced that the Elena Christian and John H. Woodson Jr. High schools were dismissed early at 1:15 p.m. because of the low water pressure. D.O.E. said WAPA would work through Friday to rectify the problem, which means C.H.S., Elena Christian and John H. Woodson will be closed on Friday.

All other schools will be open on Friday, D.O.E. said.

