

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Dept. Of Education Not Ready For Students Who Left For The Mainland To Return, Says Mary Moorhead

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ST. CROIX -- Parents who sent their children to the U.S. mainland to attend school following Hurricanes Irma and Maria, should not remove their children from the mainland facilities for education in the U.S. Virgin Islands, advised Mary Moorhead, a member of the Board of Education (B.O.E.), speaking during an event she, along with B.O.E. Chairman Terrence T. Joseph, organized.

"I decided to have this information session because people need to know. It upsets me every time I hear the commissioner and the superintendent say, 'bring your children home; bring your children back.' Because as I said, I think it's unrealistic," Ms. Moorhead said during the event, held at the D.C. Canegata Ballpark Center. Ms. Moorhead

explained that while she was hoping the schools would be ready to house the students who were sent to the mainland, "I don't see every school being on a full session next school year. I just don't see it. I don't see us being able to accommodate all the children that we had prior to the hurricane, because we lost several thousands."

While the town hall-style gathering was not sanctioned by the board, Ms. Moorhead said it was important to get feedback from concerned community members and parents, relative to the condition of education and educational facilities in the territory, as well as to share pertinent information that she had obtained.

A handful of parents turned out, along with a host of aspiring politicians -- Albert Bryan, Marise James, Javan James, Malik Stridiron, Oakland Benta, Allison DeGazon and Ricky Dean Andrews among them. Those in attendance shared a range of concerns, including mold in schools, the readiness of the Department of Education (D.O.E.) for the upcoming school year, parents who do not participate in PTAs, and whether the modular units that D.O.E. is working to install at multiple schools, are able to withstand hurricanes. (Ms. Moorhead said she was told that the modular units can withstand up to Category 2 hurricanes.)

Ms. DeGazon sought information from Ms. Moorhead regarding senators' plans to help with the problems, as there were no 32nd Legislature senators at the meeting on Wednesday. Ms. Moorhead said Senator Jean Forde planned on hosting an education meeting on April 3, where presumably the lawmakers would show up. Mr. Benta, a candidate for Senate, expressed concerns about the mold, and said that the current cadre of leaders were failing students, because while the effects of the constant inhalation of mold was not immediately apparent, it would affect them in the future.

Mr. Andrews, director of OSHA in the U.S. Virgin Islands for the public sector, highlighted the maintenance of schools as a major issue. "We tend to build things and we tend not to hold those accountable for the monies and budgets that we give to them to do maintenance," Mr. Andrews said. He said one of the ways to fix this problem is to assure that funding for the maintenance of schools is specifically allocated.

Speaking of the mold issue, a concerned parent who was diagnosed with vocal cord dysfunction after working in a moldy environment for 18 years, expressed frustration with the lack of attention to mold in classrooms. The parent, Molinda Stephen, said her child attends the John H. Woodson Junior High School, currently in split session at the Central High School, and that she could not visit her child's classroom because of mold. "The last time I had to go and speak to the teacher, she had to meet me way outside by the parking lot. When I have to go and pick up my child's report card, I have to call the principal or assistant principal," she said, because of the moldy condition of the offices housing the Woodson school officials at the Central High School facility.

"I was just diagnosed in Cleveland Clinic as totally disabled because of the mold," Ms. Stephen said. "And there are people in St. Croix and the Virgin Islands that have a lot of medical problems because of this mold and it's not being voiced out."

Mr. Bryan mentioned laws related to education that were not being implemented by the Department of Education, and whether B.O.E. had considered taking legal action for enforcement. Ms. Moorhead said the board had its own legal counsel and could bring a

legal challenge if it needs to. She also provided a document showing current statutes relative to education that she said D.O.E. was not enforcing -- among them hotel and tourism courses, and financial education programs for students in grades kindergarten through 12, based on a concept of achieving financial literacy through the teaching of personal financial management skills and the basic principles involved with earning, spending, saving and investing.

On Wednesday, D.O.E. [shared a list of issues](#) it's currently facing with St. Croix District schools, which sustained the brunt of the damage from the 2017 storms.