

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Education To Take Center Stage At Senate Hearing Today

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ST. THOMAS -- With many of the territory's schools still in double session, and the Department of Education struggling to prepare modular units that are to ease the current burden, D.O.E. officials will face lawmakers today at the Legislature here to give an account of the department's progress relative to the upcoming school year, including the myriad of challenges the department is facing.

The hearing comes two weeks [following a tour of St. Croix District Schools](#) hosted by the Committee on Education, Youth and Recreation, chaired by Senator Jean Forde. Senators had expressed concerns with the state of St. Croix District Schools, and D.O.E. followed up [with a list of issues](#) it continues to face on St. Croix, where schools received

the most damage from the 2017 storms.

Among lawmakers on the tour were Senators Alicia Hansen and Kurt Violet, both of whom assailed D.O.E. Mrs. Hansen said she was “appalled” when she saw files left in open cabinets and office floors with clear names reflected on them, appearing to be personal files of students, teachers, and support staff. “Even social security numbers were exposed. This is really ridiculous,” she said.

The veteran senator said she was fully aware that there were principals, teachers and other support staff that were willing to go into schools to retrieve equipment, files, and supplies to include literature necessary for the continuation of a viable education. But, she added, staffers were directed by the Mapp administration not to enter the facilities.

In a [Facebook post](#), Senator Kurt Violet chided D.O.E. and FEMA, stating, “Sadly there is still not a clear plan as to how we are going to reopen these facilities. The indecision of FEMA and D.O.E. is troubling! Why are we still [assessing] six months later?” Mr. Violet said many of the closed schools were fixable and should see remediation to rid them of mold. “We don’t need modulars for schools that are intact but were just abandoned,” he said.

During a January Senate hearing, D.O.E. Commissioner Sharon McCollum, who will not be present for today's hearing as she along with other D.O.E. officials are out of the territory, told lawmakers that double session may continue into the 2018-19 school year, adding that it would take six months to procure and install modular units. She said because the order of the units was being managed through FEMA’s Public Assistance Program, which is 100 percent reimbursable, it would have to be processed through the local Department of Property and Procurement, which could add additional months to the process.

Lawmakers were not pleased to learn that double sessions may continue through the upcoming school year, and they asked Ms. McCollum to expedite the process.

There are currently 10 abandoned schools in the territory, according to D.O.E.; seven in the St. Croix District (STX): (1) Lew Muckel, (2) Pearl B. Larsen, (3) Eulalie Rivera, (4) Arthur A. Richards, (5) Elena Christian, (6) John Woodson and (7) Alexander Henderson; and 3 schools in the St. Thomas/St. John District: (1) Addelita Cancryn Junior High School, (2) E. Benjamin Oliver Elementary School, and (3) Guy Benjamin Community Center.

The Mapp administration has requested \$750 million to repair and rebuild 6 school facilities, funds that have not yet been made available. And it remains to be seen how much the territory will receive from the federal government once the assessments are completed.

Attending today's hearing will be D.O.E. commissioner Chief of Staff Anthony Thomas. In addition, Racquel Berry-Benjamin, Deputy Superintendent of the St. Thomas – St. John District and Vaughn Hewitt, Deputy Superintendent of the St. Croix District will also appear before the senate to provide testimony on their respective districts, according to a D.O.E. release.