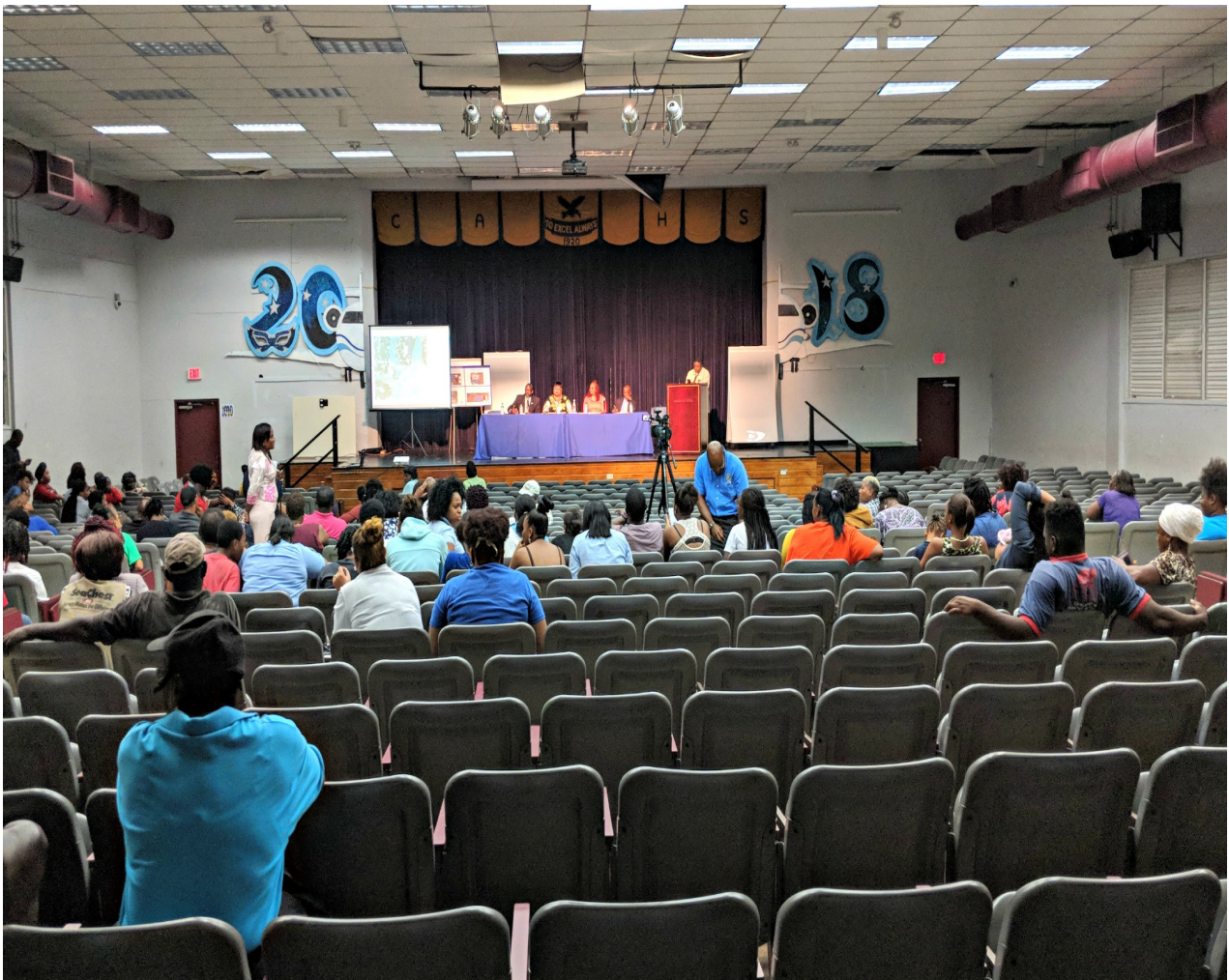


The Virgin Islands Consortium

Pointing To No Viable Alternatives, D.O.E. Will Move Forward With Placing Modular Units At C.A.H.S. Track And Field

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ST. THOMAS -- A town hall meeting held to address the Temporary School Facilities Project -- the placement of modular classrooms -- held at the Charlotte Amalie High School (C.A.H.S.) on Tuesday evening attracted dozens of concerned residents in St. Thomas, but ended with the Department of Education (D.O.E.) stating that the modular units to house Addelita Cancryn Junior High School students would still be placed on the C.A.H.S. track and field because viable options were nonexistent.

A panel of four officials answered questions from community members about the modular classrooms. Two of the panelists present were D.O.E. Commissioner Sharon McCollum and C.A.H.S. Principal Alcede Edwards.

Teachers, community members and enraged students traded shots with the panel that evening, accusing them of stonewalling key issues and blocking their attempts to ask questions. Mr. Edwards spoke in favor of the modular classrooms and said that there would be alternatives to physical education programs that included shuttling students to Lionel Roberts Stadium for classes. Some parents voiced concerns about how much instruction time would be lost when busing students to the location. Some audience members scoffed at the cost of new vehicles needed for the changes.

Former D.O.E. commissioner, Donna Frett-Gregory, who is now seeking a seat in the 33rd Legislature, questioned the department on the capacity of C.A.H.S., Bertha C. Boschulte Middle School (B.C.B.) and A.C.J.H.S. The former commissioner pointed out that under her tenure, B.C.B. could accommodate about 1,200 students -- to which an official responded by stating that she was not aware of how many students B.C.B. could hold, and that the number was 700 to her knowledge.

Senator Jean Forde, when asked by The Consortium if he believed D.O.E. had adequately addressed the concerns of the community at the town hall, said, "I think they did a horrible job. I think, number one, they should have come to listen. They wanted to shut individuals down, in particular they wanted to shut students down."

The town hall meeting on St. Thomas, very similar to the heated town hall meeting on St. John, had moments where panelists and members of the audience quarreled and raised their voices. The senator acknowledged that the department had a difficult task ahead, and agreed that the public and stakeholders deserved to have a say in future plans for the territory's schools.

"I'm afraid that decisions are being made in the dark," said Mr. Forde. The senator expressed disappointment in the department for attempting to limit questions from the public.

Residents asked a number of questions about the well-being of teachers after the storms, especially those experiencing split sessions. Imani Daniel, chairperson of the St. Thomas Recovery Team, asked about the commissioner's comments at a recent public hearing where she publicly stated that some international teachers would lose their J-1 Visa Exchange Visitor Program awards, and would be sent back home. Ms. McCollum denied the comment and dismissed the notion that there would be a shortage of teachers.

The commissioner added that the department had been in contact with the State Department regarding the status of international teachers in the territory, explaining that the program requires teachers to work full time to meet program requirements. With many of those teachers experiencing split sessions, the State Department has noted that they risk losing their award. The commissioner argued that the modular classrooms being placed at C.A.H.S. would allow normal sessions to resume and prevent those teachers from losing their status under the J-1 Visa Program.

Ms. Daniel also accused Ms. McCollum of contradicting statements she made at another public session, where she spoke about leasing the damaged A.C.J.H.S. campus to private contractors and allowing the Virgin Islands Port Authority to bulldoze the area for development. Ms. McCollum dismissed this accusation as well, saying it was "purely speculation," and that if students stayed on double sessions, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (F.E.M.A.) would pull its support on crucial programs in the territory. F.E.M.A. did not send an official representative to the town hall meeting.

Though the meeting was planned before two student-led protests in St. Thomas, it garnered more attention as coverage of the students' efforts -- which saw them marching to the Earl B. Ottley Legislature in protest of D.O.E.'s decision to place modular units on the C.A.H.S. track and field -- rose to top priority for the territory's media outlets.

Even so, it seems the modular units to house A.C.J.H.S. will be placed on the grounds after all, with Ms. McCollum, on multiple occasions, expressing that there were no viable alternatives.

Before the town hall ended, Ms. McCollum pleaded with the community to work with the department to find a solution to the territory's education hurdles.