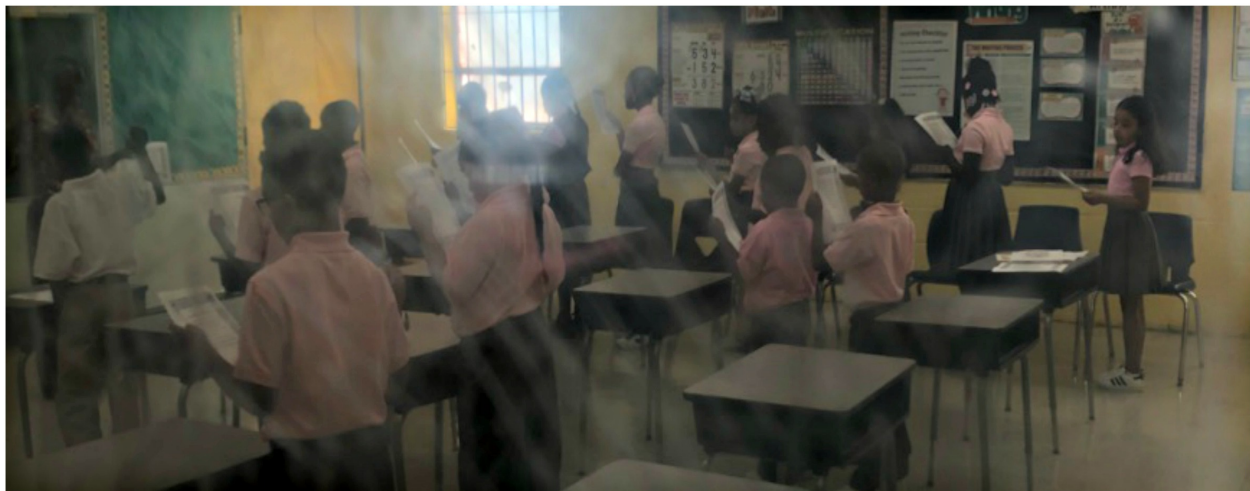


The Virgin Islands Consortium

Nowhere To Sit: Educators Express Frustration With Dept. Of Education's Lack Of Preparedness On First Day Of School

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ST. CROIX -- Students across the island of St. Croix who headed to public schools in full session for the first time since Hurricane Irma and Maria impacted the territory a year ago, were visibly excited to be back to school for what is expected to be a normal school year. From Pearl B. Larsen to Elena Christian Junior High School (now housed at the former Manor School), to Alfredo Andrews Elementary and John H. Woodson Junior High -- schools visited by The Consortium Tuesday -- students appeared happy to be back in a learning setting.

But even as students seemed pleased just to be back in classrooms and not the double session environment they learned through following the 2017 storms, some parents and educators expressed frustration to this publication with the lack of readiness they encountered.

At Pearl B. Larsen, where a government contractor continued to perform work, a parent whose child attends the school was concerned that an exit was completed fenced off to prevent students from venturing off to the construction site, where the contractor [appeared to be installing foundations](#). "I think we should have waited until the construction here is finished before we proceed," said Shamade Burke. "As a parent I wouldn't have mind waiting an extra two to four weeks just to make it safe for everybody. I mean, the storms were a year ago; a year isn't much time. This isn't about any administration, this is about getting it done correctly. We don't know when a fire or emergency could happen. It could be a bomb threat -- it could be anything -- but they can't evacuate in the normal procedure which they've been trained on, so the kids are going to be lost."

Mr. Burke's view of waiting a few weeks to open the schools was shared by a number of educators. At Elena Christian, where construction was ongoing on Tuesday, some teachers said that their classrooms were too small for the amount of students on their list to teach.

For the school's principal, however, the first day at Elena was a success. "I feel like we had a successful orientation," said Henry Mark. All students were given a schedule, we went over rules, policies and regulations, and they had questions and the questions were answered. They went over schedules and protocol, and we were able to give insurance as well as IDs... I think the day went well."

Asked about the concerns with classrooms being too small, Mr. Mark said, "I think it's fine. If the classroom is small then the class will be small."

At Alfredo Andrews, there were classrooms without seats for students to sit and teachers without desks. In some classrooms, students stood or sat on crates during class. Educators were visibly vexed by the Department of Education's failure to furnish the classrooms, telling The Consortium that another week of preparation would have been better.

Senator Kurt Viallet, who had toured the schools prior to Tuesday, said despite the missteps, he was happy that schools opened on time. "I must say that I'm happy that schools are open because children needed that sense of normalcy," Mr. Viallet, a former educator, said in the lobby area of Alfredo Andrews. "A lot of children were at home and parents were having issues in terms of child care, so the opening of school is a good thing."

He added, "There's a lot of work to do in certain schools and I've been doing a brief analysis, and I'm going to share my findings with the superintendent and with the commissioner. However, I don't think that I had the mindset that everything was going to be perfect today. We know that we have issues and we know that they need to be addressed, and we now must develop a plan as to how we're going to be able to address it as quickly as possible.

"There's a lot of issues in reference to desks and chairs, and a lot of those issues is because we have so much damaged equipment and the new shipment of desks and chairs have not arrived." Mr. Violet said he would like to see the commissioner of Education come up with a plan by week's end to address the matter.

"I would ask the parents and community to be patient and to see how they themselves can help to make sure that we're able to get back to normalcy as quickly as possible," the senator said. "The children seem to be very happy to be back."

Former Senator Kenneth Gittens, who also toured Alfredo Andrews, had a different take. "I'm disappointed," Mr. Gittens said. "In one word, disappointed."

He added, "Haste makes waste, and evidently we weren't prepared for accepting students today, September 4. I was wondering myself what happened to a more feasible date later on down in the month to open school and be ready for our student population coming in."

The former lawmaker, who is seeking office in the 2018 general election as a senator, said he witnessed students, parents, faculty and staff coming into schools while new furniture were being delivered and old furniture were being removed. "That equates to total chaos," he said, "and there are many classrooms without air condition, with poor ceiling fans that are obviously not working, and again, the lack of furniture in the classrooms."

On the inoperable ceiling fans and lack of AC, Mr. Gittens was speaking to what he said he saw at John H. Woodson. The principal of that school, however, said the problem with the AC units would be fixed by the end of the school day.

"All the rooms are clean, everything in terms of classrooms are ready," said Woodson Principal Rodney Moorhead. "Only concern is that we do have a few AC units that are being worked on right now, and they should be up by the end of today."