

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Mapp Administration And AFT To Resume Negotiations Friday; Charlotte Amalie Loses 15 Classrooms As Building B Is Condemned

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ST. THOMAS -- The Mapp administration will be back at the bargaining table on Friday with the American Federation of Teachers' local chapters, Governor Kenneth Mapp made known during a press conference held in a conference room at WICO Monday.

Facing an education crisis just over one month before the general election that will determine the governor's fate, the press conference was an attempt to rein in the mounting problem -- which has so far included a number of job actions not only because of salary matters but working condition at schools.

Some parents of the Arthur A. Richards Junior High School who dropped off their children at the John H. Woodson Junior High School on Monday, returned home with their children after witnessing what was described as a haphazard attempt by the Mapp administration to prepare classrooms to house students from the two schools. Some spoke of freshly painted wood used to partition classrooms that filled the rooms with a strong smell of paint as it had yet to completely dry. "The smell is a bit overbearing," said a person who was in one of the classrooms. This classroom was also said to have the remains of wood from the construction job, pointing to a hurried effort by the contractor.

One parent also spoke of mold. "A lot of the kids are complaining that their belly hurting them, their head hurting them," said a parent, according to a video recording viewed by The Consortium.

When questioned about the John H. Woodson matter and whether his administration had moved too hastily in reopening schools, Mr. Mapp stood by his decision to resume instruction on September 4, and again blamed the Category 5 storms that ravaged the territory in 2017 for the issues.

At one point, the governor spoke of other commitments that his administration was focused on in the immediate aftermath of the storms -- removal of debris, cleanup of roads and other important matters -- but he failed to mention schools among them.

Pressed on whether his administration should have waited longer to deliver schools that were better prepared to house students, the governor was steadfast with his response.

"Monday morning quarterbacking is a lot of fun," Mr. Mapp said, relegating the issue as spilled milk that is not useful to the present situation. "We watch the game on Sunday, and when the quarterback don't get that ball we can sit back and say, 'you know, you should have done this, you should have done that, and you should have done the other.' It doesn't matter; there is always someone who will tell you that you should have done this a different way. We have to do what we have to do with the information that we have on the table."

Mr. Mapp said he supports the increasing of teachers' salaries, and was hoping for an agreement when the AFT and the Office of Collective Bargaining meet on Friday.

During his remarks, the governor said his administration had met with education union leaders in 2015 to discuss their priorities and that he had addressed the majority of their concerns. Union leaders said then that teachers were very distressed about the failure of the previous administration to pay a portion of the contract agreed to in 2010. The Mapp-Potter administration ensured the teachers and other many unionized employees were paid.

"In 2016, we didn't just pay teachers, we paid over 3,000 government workers on their outstanding obligations on the collective bargaining agreements they signed in 2010, bringing all of the collective bargaining agreements up to date and funding them," he said.

One of the other major issues raised by AFT leaders was that starting salaries were too low in order to recruit and retain qualified teachers. Last month, Mr. Mapp issued an executive order that increased starting base salaries for teachers from \$34,000 to

\$44,000. Some union leaders have now complained that this is unfair to current teachers. However, the governor has repeatedly explained that he only has the power to increase base salaries and the wages for senior teachers must be addressed at the bargaining table.

“We had 152 teacher vacancies last year,” he said. “We, the administration and the Office of Collective Bargaining, are prepared to work through to a solution, but negotiation is a give and take.”

The governor said he along with Lt. Governor Osbert Potter remain committed to supporting a living wage for all Virgin Islanders. More than 5,000 government workers have received salary increases since 2016, he said. Mr. Mapp has also approved legislation increasing the minimum wage for all private sector workers from \$7.25 to \$10.50 per hour.

Charlotte Amalie High School

During the press conference, Mr. Mapp said building B of Charlotte Amalie High School had been condemned, and that 30 classrooms were lost. But in a release issued late Monday, the Department of Education corrected the record, stating that only the eastern portion of building B had been condemned and only 15 classrooms lost.

The school is still scheduled for a September 27 opening, while no date has been set for Addelita Cancryn.

“The administration of Charlotte Amalie has arranged for teachers to share classrooms in the interim,” she said. D.O.E. Acting Commissioner Dionne Wells-Hedrington.

D.O.E. said due to damages sustained during Hurricanes Irma and Maria, coupled with deferred maintenance, an engineering team recommended that the department cordon off and abandon all levels of the eastern section of Building B, including the perimeter on the southern side, where concrete is dropping from roof’s edge to the ground below.



Building B is made up of two adjoining buildings: the western two-story section, which is a newer addition, and the eastern 3-story section. Fifteen classrooms are lost as a result of the closure, D.O.E. said Monday.

Teachers at Charlotte Amalie High School are assigned classrooms for the course of the school year. High schools in the territory are on a four-class block schedule, however, teachers do not teach four classes a day. The contingency plan calls for teachers who are displaced from building B to utilize available rooms at times when those teachers with assigned classrooms have their "prep" periods, the department said.

Mrs. Wells-Hedrington clarified that the new plan to share classrooms is not a double session schedule. Furthermore, all available courses will still be offered at the school and no student's schedule will change, she said.

D.O.E. said it is currently working on a public assistance request package with FEMA to purchase additional modular units to supplement the number of classrooms lost. At the press conference, Governor Mapp also announced that air quality tests are ongoing in schools. Adcon Environmental Services and Environmental Concepts (ENCON) will perform air quality tests in public schools across the territory and results will be published on the Department's website as they become available.

In addition to Charlotte Amalie High School in the St. Thomas – St. John District, the Lockhart Elementary, Joseph Gomez Elementary, Yvonne E. Milliner-Bowsky Elementary, and the Ivanna Eudora Kean High schools will also open for instruction on Thursday, September 27.

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