

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Alexander Henderson Students To Report To School At Arthur Richards Campus After Unknown Contaminant Causes Students, Staff To Fall Ill

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ST. CROIX -- Students of the Alexander Henderson Elementary School will report to the the Arthur A. Richards Junior High School starting Tuesday, after health officials said an unknown contaminant caused students at the school along with staff to fall ill. Symptoms of this unknown contaminant include diarrhea, nausea, stomach aches and vomiting, according to Department of Health Territorial Epidemiologist Dr. Esther Ellis, who recommended the immediate closure of the elementary school until the matter is rectified.

On Friday, parents of Alexander Henderson students gathered at the new Arthur A. Richards modular auditorium for a meeting with Department of Education officials. There, a number of questions surrounding how the two schools would operate on the same campus were answered.

Newly appointed St. Croix Superintendent Carlos McGregor explained that while both schools beginning this week will report to the Arthur A. Richards campus around the same time, the facility, with a capacity of 800, is big enough to accommodate all the students. He stressed that the students will be using different portions of the facility in an effort to minimize interaction among the junior high and elementary children, and added that junior high and elementary students will utilize separate restrooms. Break times will be on different time schedules to allow students to utilize the cafeteria with their peers. (Arthur Richards school, for example, starts at 7:30 a.m., and Alexander Henderson students will have breakfast at 7:30 a.m.).

"The intermingling between Arthur Richards and Henderson will be very, very limited," Mr. McGregor said.

"We've met with the other administrators and one of our concerns on both ends that we're making sure to address is that the students do not interact with each other because we understand that it's two complete variant levels," said Alexander Henderson Principal Natasha Ohalloran-Smith.

Alexander Henderson, with a total of 390 students, will remain at the Arthur A. Richards campus until the matter can be rectified, Mr. McGregor said, adding that a goal of his is to assure that students learn in facilities that are clean and free of contaminants causing illness. He said once testing is completed, his office will be completely open with the public in revealing the results.

The Department of Education officials were unable to say how long it would take to correct the issue. However, they said no mold was found in early tests.

Parents with students attending Alexander Henderson, who live near the facility, were asked to drop their children off to that school's campus at 7:00 a.m., where they will be picked up and bused to Arthur A. Richards. Henderson will also be a drop-off point for those students. Orientation for Alexander Henderson students will begin at 7:55 a.m. at the Arthur A. Richards campus on Tuesday. Buses once carrying students to Henderson will instead transport them to Arthur A. Richards directly, Mr. McGregor said.

Frustrated parents, who once again must dislodge their students from familiarity to another campus, expressed disappointment with the development. One parent asked whether modular classrooms were considered for Alexander Henderson. Others sought clarity of how the changes would affect learning. Yet while the new development caused some vexation, parents were generally pleased that D.O.E. was being proactive and straightforward with the move to Arthur A. Richards.

Feature Image: Alexander Henderson Principal Natasha Ohalloran-Smith addresses concerned parents during a Friday meeting at the Arthur A. Richards Junior High School campus.

