

The Virgin Islands Consortium

On St. Thomas, First Day Of School Opens With Some Expected Glitches, And A Few Unexpected Ones

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Ready or not public schools opened on time on Tuesday.

ST. THOMAS -- The first day of school had glitches, of course: some clearly beyond the Virgin Islands Department of Education (D.O.E.) control. And a few more that resulted directly from questionable, last-minute department decisions and dubious planning.

The new school year orientation for Charlotte Amalie High School junior and seniors had been scheduled for last week, for example. When Hurricane Dorian passed, and squeezed an already-impossible schedule even further, orientation was re-scheduled for Tuesday -- the day school reopened. After orientation, 11th and 12th graders at C.A.H.S. were sent

home.

Dorian caused no known building damage, but the storm caused flight delays and cancellations at airports in Florida and along the Eastern Seaboard. Nearly half a dozen V.I. teachers were left stranded stateside as classes got underway in the territory. "We had some teachers stuck in Miami," said CAHS Principal April Petrus. "The storm threw everything off."

That said, volunteers and D.O.E. staff turned up over the weekend to help relocate classrooms and prepare, to the extent they could, delayed teachers for the start of school.

At CAHS, "significant structural damage" caused by hurricanes Irma and Maria and decades of neglected maintenance was discovered just weeks ago, rendered yet another building on the complex unsafe. Students returned yesterday to modular classrooms spread across the ball field and on the outskirts of the main campus. Two of the three buildings comprising CAHS have been condemned. The high school now fully occupies what had been Addelita Cancryn Junior High. Some Cancryn students are now in what was known as Lockhart Elementary. The youngest of the elementary students are in yet another set of "colorful" modular classroom.

Even so, students at Lockhart Primary School (as it is now known) were greeted by faculty and staff, Governor Albert Bryan, Commissioner Racquel Berry-Benjamin, Superintendent Stefan Jürgen, and elected officials.

On the East End of St. Thomas, photos of moldy ceiling tiles, reportedly from Ivanna Eudora Kean High School were shared with the Consortium. Around the territory, department of education maintenance staff helped fill in the gaps.

Conditions were not the only issue. In the St. Croix District, some parents turned to social media to air grievances. "I went with my sister-in-law to register her kids for school here in St. Croix, at the location of Department of Education ... Never in my life, have I witnessed such a disorganization and a lack of urgency," Alexa Cintron, a St. Croix native who now lives in Florida, posted on the D.O.E. Facebook page in a note to Education Commissioner Racquel Berry-Benjamin.

"Simple things that should been resolved in the months of summer break were not resolved. People, including their children who were dressed in uniform, were standing for HOURS in the hot sun," she said.

Issues notwithstanding, For Ms. Berry-Benjamin, the important thing was that students were back in class. "This has been an exciting day for the Department of Education," she said. "Our students are back learning, our parents are happy they're back in school and we are happy to have them. Our teachers are ready, they've welcomed our students back and they're excited to begin another year of teaching and learning."

Mr. Bryan said, "I wouldn't have missed it for the world. The most, I think, heartening thing of the day was the spirit of these schools that lives in the teachers and the students-- they are just excited to be here."

The governor did note that there was room for improvements at the territory's public schools.

“I look forward to seeing the libraries fill up with more books,” he said. “But when you look at those teacher classrooms and the work that they put in to making sure they are prepared for their students today, you know that there is so much commitment and dedication that lies in our Department of Education.”

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