

The Virgin Islands Consortium

On St. Croix, Students Express Excitement To Be Back At School; D.O.E. Hails New K-8 Model As 'A Plus All Around'

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ST. CROIX -- Department of Education (D.O.E.). Commissioner Racquel Berry-Benjamin and her team conducted two days of assessments in both districts after Hurricane Dorian, and determined that while there was minor water damage and debris resulting from the storm, nothing they found warranted delaying the scheduled opening date of the territory's schools.

On Tuesday, students and their parents filed into all schools across the territory.

St. Croix Educational Complex High School

Students attending the St. Croix Educational Complex (S.C.E.C.) were greeted at the gate by faculty, staff, the school superintendent, Carlos McGregor, school monitors, and Senator Novelle Francis.

There was palpable excitement in the air as students and their parents filed in after a thorough inspection ensuring that their attire met with the school's outlined code.

Several new students expressed nervousness at being in high school for the first time, but the school's student council had a team out front to offer a special welcome to them by handing out cups and souvenirs and offering welcoming smiles. Even S.C.E.C. teachers were greeted with samples of candy from the student council.

Natasha Liburd, assistant principal at S.C.E.C., told the Consortium that an orientation was being held at 8:00 a.m. for students who may have been away and missed the previously scheduled orientation, so that they could be informed of school rules and ensure that everything was set. They would then be given their class schedules and head to their first class.

Ms. Liburd explained that new students coming in are oriented by their first period teacher, and if the teacher is not available the seniors often take a lead orienting the students regarding S.C.E.C. culture and what it is like to be a Barracuda.

Cynthia Graham, D.O.E. public relations communications director, was also present and explained to the Consortium that, students arriving on time and being greeted by faculty and staff, and superintendents in both districts welcoming them is essentially what was taking place at all of the territory's schools on Tuesday.

Ms. Graham took time to speak on the issue of maintenance. "It's no secret that the D.O.E. has had to conduct summer maintenance on our schools, but maintenance is on-going, it is year-round. The department will be releasing more information about some of the projects we are working on throughout the year, but as far as September 3rd, schools are open, teachers are in classrooms and staff is ready to greet students." She said she observed that, not just students, but staff and faculty were excited and ready to be at S.C.E.C. "We are off to a really good start," Ms. Graham reckoned.



Senator Novelle Francis said he noted that most of the S.C.E.C. students came prepared with their proper attire, schedules already in hand and ready to begin classes with only just a few being admonished to make adjustments to their attire. "Assistant principals are here to ensure that compliance of all rules is in full effect. All in all, the children seem to be pretty excited, and some of them are a bit nervous coming from a different school, but it looks like it will be another great school year," he said.

St. Croix Central High School

Students attending C.H.S. were welcomed at the gate by faculty, staff, the school superintendent, and school monitors.

Students in the 9th and 10th grades who missed the previously scheduled orientation were directed to the cafeteria and students in the 11th and 12th grades were directed to one of the modules on campus so that they could be informed of school rules, pay for their health insurance, purchase their physical education uniforms, and be issued their class schedules.

The lines were long and the process slow and when the Consortium spoke with the principal, Yves Abraham, he explained that next year he would impress upon students and their parents the importance of attending the mandatory orientation to alleviate having long lines and a long wait to get settled on the first day of school.

Mr. Francis was on hand to greet students and speak with the principal along with faculty and staff. "I am surprised at the number of students that did not take advantage of the orientation and are now trying to obtain their class schedules today. That puts them at a disadvantage," Mr. Francis said.

He added that students could have been in class in a timely manner if they had attended the previously scheduled orientation. However, guidance counselors were on hand to aid in the process and get things moving.

Mr. Francis shared that one of the guidance counselors noted to him that there was only one para-professional available on hand at the school when there should be at least five assigned, especially for core subjects, to be able to support the teachers. As a result, the teachers are challenged in being able to address all of the students' concerns.

Mr. Abraham shared with the Consortium some of things that the school still needs. "There are classrooms that are in need of air conditioners, and roof repairs and painting that needs to be done."

He did express that some things were going well. The internet and phones were working and labs were open.

Margaret Burnett, assistant principal at C.H.S. remarked that school administrators will address any deficiencies experienced by students as soon as possible so that their needs are met in a timely manner.

Ms. Burnett also shared that C.H.S. hoped to collaborate with the Parent Teacher Student Association and community leaders and businesses to source personnel with skills needed to help bring the maintenance of the school up to par. "Some parents are

very skilled, and we would like to capitalize on those skills,” Ms. Burnett said.

Pearl B. Larsen Elementary School

Dr. Carla Bastian, deputy superintendent, had just completed making her rounds at Pearl B. Larsen K-8 elementary and took time to speak with the Consortium on her way out. “I am making my rounds at all of the schools on St. Croix ensuring that everything is rolling out smoothly. Of course, this is the first year of our K-8 orientation, and I am pleased to say that today’s roll out at Pearl B. Larsen was a success.” Ms. Bastian explained that it was a new environment for some students, but some who were promoted from Pearl B. Larsen are returning to their old school where they graduated from the sixth grade. “I know they are happy to be back, because there are a lot of familiar faces in the building. Our students are making the transition. We expected it to be smooth and it was,” Ms. Bastian said.

The deputy superintendent said that Loretta Moorehead, Pearl B.’s principal, and Juliette Heddad Miller, the assistant principal, were doing an extremely great job making sure that the roll out is successful. “Of course, this is one of our pre-K program schools, so we do have our four-year-olds in what we call the granny preschool program. Claude O. Markoe School in Frederiksted is the other school in the district that implements the pre-K program. This is a big deal in the district,” Ms. Bastian explained. There is actually K4 thru grade 8 in the building.

According to Ms. Bastian, Pearl B. is a high performing blue-ribbon school. “All of our schools are actually great schools, and we have great teachers in all of them,” she said.

Ms. Bastian explained that while she had already made rounds at both the St. Croix Central High School (C.H.S.) and S.C.E C. early in the morning, she would be returning to both for a second visit in the afternoon.

Ms. Moorehead is a first-year principal at Pearl B. Larsen who was reassigned from Eulalie Rivera. She started as an assistant principal at C.H.S. before being reassigned to Eulalie Rivera where she was an assistant principal for three years and then became principal.

Ms. Moorehead has been working hard at the school throughout the summer getting things prepared for the start of the year.

She expressed that the experience thus far has been great. “The staff has been wonderful. I share my vision with them and take input about their expectation and vision. Collaborating has brought everyone on board.” They have been working until 9:00-10:00 p.m. to be adequately ready for the beginning of the school year.

Pearl B. students remark on K-8 model

A group of students who graduated from Pearl B. and attended Elena Christian Junior High School (E.C.J.H.) for the 7th grade but were now back at Pearl B. for the 8th grade, told the Consortium that being a part of the K-8 model was exciting. One student described it as nostalgic, another said it was like a walk down memory lane, and another was preoccupied with making contact with all of her prior teachers from Pearl B. and expressed that she had connected with all but one. They were excited, because not only

were they back at their old school, but they also had their school counselor from Eleanor Christian Jr. High, Stacey Hewitt, who was now a counselor at Pearl B.

Introduction of the K-8 Model

The Superintendent of Schools, Carlos McGregor, spoke to the Consortium in detail about the research and planning that went into implementing the K-8 model in the Virgin Islands.

For St. Croix, Mr. McGregor said it all began with E.C.J.H. students' displacement from their school and temporary placement at the former Manor School complex. There were approximately 200 students that were housed at Manor School. The campus was inadequate to house the school because there was no gym, cafeteria, or library and the superintendent said that he could not see them being housed there for another year, so the department had to determine how to rectify the situation. The focus was in determining what was in the best interest of the students, Mr. McGregor explained.

"The D.O.E. looked at the island's elementary schools, we saw a decline in enrollment, and determined that there was room in the buildings. We then began the research into the K-8 model to see if it was a fit for our territory. After looking at the K-8 model across the United States, the research revealed that it was one of the trending models that school districts are using," he said. Department officials then determined that this would be the best opportunity to try the model in the territory.

Pearl B. Larsen Students are promoted and attend E.C.J.H., so those are the two schools the department looked at first in terms of transitioning to the K-8 model. Another factor was the closing of Alexander Henderson School because of some issues there that pushed D.O.E. to merge Henderson and Arthur Richards Junior High School (A.R.J.H.). It was already a fit, and rather than have two schools on one campus, D.O.E. combined them and made it K-8, Mr. McGregor explained.

"That worked last year, but it was a little tight, so we looked at Eulalie Rivera, one of the feeder schools that comes to Arthur Richards and noticed that if we right-sized the classroom we could also have Eulalie Rivera as a K-8. We took approximately 70 students from Arthur Richards campus and placed them at Eulalie Rivera," he continued.

It is the department's hope that next year, with the refurbishment of some of the classrooms at Claudio Markoe, it will also be conformed to the K-8 model.

Mr. McGregor explained that this was the rationale behind the change to the K-8 model in the district. D.O.E. also made a change in the school's start and end times. The observation was that about two and a half hours of high school students time were being wasted. Students arrived at school at 6:45 a.m., lingered around the parking lot a bit, then at 7:30 a.m. they were allowed into the building where they would mill around in the hallways, and at 8:00 a.m. classes began. They were also often last to be picked up in the afternoon, so another hour and half of wasted time, according to Mr. McGregor

He said the decision was made to begin earlier since the students were already at school and release them earlier, so they have time for after-school jobs, internships, and to spend time at the library. Athletes now have more time to spend on the playing field and still ample time to complete homework. "It made sense to change to early start times and

early end times for high school," Mr. McGregor said.

"As a result, we had to stagger the start time of the other schools because of the school bus," he said.

The territory's elementary students will also benefit, according to the superintendent. Once the two-hour after-school program kicks in from 3:30 – 5:30 p.m., parents who end work at 5:00 p.m. do not have to rush to pick up their students because they know they have until 5:30 p.m. for pick up, he said.

"It is a plus all around," he maintained. "The vision for this K-8 plan is students first. D.O.E. felt it was important to create a schedule that was in the best interest of our students and that is the main reason we implemented the new plan this school year. We are looking forward to it."