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Dept. of Education Said Potential Harmful Odor at CHS was Eliminated, but Same Odor Forces School Closure on Monday

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Central High School By. Ernice Gilbert, VIC

ST. CROIX — In a release issued Sunday night announcing the reopening of the St. Croix Central High School following three days of closure last week because of a foul, potentially harmful odor encompassing the campus, the Department of Education wasn't clear in its release on whether it had found a solution to the problem. The Consortium spoke with the department's communications director, Cynthia Graham, and was assured that indeed, the problem had been resolved.

On Monday afternoon, however, school was again dismissed early because of the same foul odor, although D.O.E. said it had identified the problem to be clogged sewer lines, and that contractors had dealt with the issue.

On Monday night, the department said CHS would be closed today and that in response to the ongoing issue, an Incident Command System (ICS) has been stood up as professionals continue to work diligently to identify the source of the odor.

D.O.E. said responding agencies and departments include the Education, Virgin Islands Fire Services, Department of Planning & Natural Resources, Virgin Islands Territorial Emergency Management Agency, Virgin Islands Waste Management Authority, Virgin Islands Department of Health's Division of Environmental Health, Virgin Islands Department of Public Works, and the Virgin Islands National Guard (VING).

"The health and safety of our students and staff are of the highest priority, so we will continue to work closely with our partner agencies and do whatever is necessary to rectify this issue," said St. Croix Insular Superintendent Carlos McGregor.

Joint efforts to identify and mitigate the source of the scent included canvassing the immediate and surrounding communities and industrial sectors, and cleaning and deodorizing sewer lines on and near the Central High School campus, D.O.E. said Monday night. The work began last week and continued throughout the weekend. To increase the response initiatives and increase aerial monitoring operations, the Virgin Islands Fire Service has enlisted the support of the VING's 23rd Weapons of Mass Destruction Civil Support Team (WMD-CST). DPNR has also contacted the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) for additional support to the island.

Staff at the Governor Juan F. Luis Hospital (JFLH) and the Virgin Islands Department of Health's Emergency Medical Services (EMS) are prepared to support, respond, and provide immediate assistance to residents impacted by this issue. Residents with health issues relating to this incident are advised to report to JFLH immediately.

The department said it will continue to provide updates on any impacts to public health and the environment.