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AFT Union Heads Blast Dept. of Education For Keeping Educators, Unions Out of Decision-Making on School Reopening

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Presidents of the Federation of Teachers Union (AFT) in both districts expressed concern that they were being excluded from the decision-making process as it relates to the resumption of in-person learning at the territory's public schools.

AFT St. Croix President, Rosa Soto-Thomas, said during a Senate Committee on Education and Workforce Development hearing Friday that union leaders along with teachers receive important information from the Dept. of Education through social media along with the general public. "There are instances when pertinent information is not communicated directly to our members and the union but is released via social media and other mediums, causing chaos and mistrust," she said.

Carol Callwood, the St. Thomas-St. John District AFT president, said, "One thing that is undeniably clear and demonstrated throughout the nation, successful school reopening plans include the representatives of the employees. Mr. Callwood also believes union leaders and teachers are provided information after decisions are made by the Dept. of Education.

"The most important people to discuss how to open a classroom and how to resume instruction should be the people who are resuming instruction," he said during testimony, stressing that D.O.E. only provides information after the department has decided on a particular matter.

Ms. Soto-Thomas spoke on a recent case of Covid-19 at D.O.E. where she said a member of the department was identified as a close contact of the person who tested positive. This person, she said, returned to work before the current CDC guideline recommended. She added that D.O.E. did not sanitize the building in which the Covid-positive individual worked. "This fans the flame of further mistrust and resentment on behalf of AFT members and rightfully so," Ms. Soto-Thomas said.

She provided a checklist of items that would need to be resolved before teachers felt safe about resuming in-person learning. Some items on the list included a Covid-19 response plan for each site; proper ventilation and mold remediation; teacher shortage and retention; and working to rebuild trust between educators and the Dept. of Education.

Ms. Soto-Thomas's demands caught the attention of Senator Kurt Vialet, who said, "When it comes to the public school children we always have an excuse as to why we don't want them to be educated." He agreed that teachers should have status of negotiation, but added, "You put 20 negatives as to why you can't open and then right after that you put we want to negotiate."

Mr. Vialet added, "I have stood on this floor countless times and said the Department of Education must include teachers in the decisions. That is how we determine the path moving forward. But we can't have every single entity giving a justification on why we can't have in-school learning when you have the private and parochial schools going to school every single day."

Senator Marvin Blyden chimed in on the matter of private and parochial schools being open for in-person learning. "Why reinvent the wheel," he said. "Look at what works, what we can improve on, and get it done. Let's just do it."

Ms. Soto-Thomas stated, "I'd be lying if I said the [Dept. of Education] hasn't made progress. They have made a lot of progress but we are still not where we need to be."