

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Dept. of Education Proclaims 'Change Course Now' Motto as Renovated Charlotte Amalie High School Annex is Unveiled

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Top V.I. Dept. of Education officials celebrated what they described as a “momentous” day for the territory Wednesday as they cut the ribbon on the Charlotte Amalie High School Annex, formerly the Raphael O. Wheatley Skill Center. The facility will be temporarily utilized by students from the Wheatley Center and Charlotte Amalie High until the new C.A.H.S. is built.

Exuding excitement, Education Chief Operations Officer Dionne Wells-Hedrington, who has led the school rebuild effort, could hardly contain her elation, stating that the

renovation "marked the beginning of the change" Governor Albert Bryan spoke of. She added, "Governor Bryan said it, change course now. So as we tour this site you will see the vision of change. We are changing the way that classrooms look, we are changing the face of education, we are transforming the teaching and learning experience of our children. This is indeed a momentous occasion." She described the temporary facility as "a feather in our cap and a feather in the transformation of our schools moving forward."

Some of the features of the renovated annex include:

- New modern lighting
- Storefront windows
- Moveable panel walls
- IT system
- Modern computer lab
- Monitors
- Intercom
- Access control doors
- New restrooms

The renovated building's capacity is 170 students, according to Mrs. Hedrington. Students will also be able to eat in the "commons area," a space in the classroom. "Remember this is temporary — we're not going to call it permanent — until the new Charlotte Amalie High School is built," Mrs. Wells-Hedrington said.



Education Chief Operations Officer Dionne Wells-Hedrington spoke passionately about the development of new schools during the unveiling of the Charlotte Amalie High School Annex, formerly the Raphael O. Wheatley Skill Center. (Credit: Kyle Murphy for VI Consortium)

Island Media Systems, a company contracted by Education for the IT infrastructure of the new facilities, said it sought to set a standard with the skill center in terms of IT and data infrastructure — the wiring, the labeling of wires, among other features — so that maintenance and troubleshooting is simplified, said an official during a tour of the facility Wednesday. The company installed a new intercom two-way system so every classroom includes stainless steel panel that allows two-way communication between the classroom and the administrative offices. There's also complete camera coverage outside the facility, affording principals, monitors and others in authority to observe the surroundings.

The computer lab has huddle tables, explained by Island Media Systems as the "new style of learning," allowing for a collaborative environment between instructor and student, and among students. Monitors will be added to facilitate remote learning from different locations. "We tried to set a standard here so we can move forward and duplicate each of the following buildings and venues," the company said.

The facility, while mostly completed, must still see the installation of Covid-related safety equipment, including hand-sanitizing stations, hand-washing stations, among other safety equipment before students are welcomed. "What you're looking at right now is the infrastructure itself — the facility's modernization," said Mrs. Wells-Hedrington. The facility is expected to be ready for August 9.

An educator of the Wheatley Center — the only post-secondary education technical institute in the St. Thomas-St. John District — said teachers were not privy to details relative to their move. The campus was slated to be moved to the old Gladys Abraham Elementary School, however Deputy STT-STJ Superintendent Symra Dee Brown told the Consortium during the tour that a meeting was held with the Wheatley Center principal earlier this year. Relative to a location for Wheatley Center students, it has been decided that the renovated annex will be a shared space until the new complex at Gladys Abraham is completed. That facility is expected to be ready for students between Dec. 2021-Jan. 2022, said Ms. Brown.

During her remarks, Dept. of Education Commissioner Racquel Berry-Benjamin described the ribbon-cutting event as "a great day," as the renovated facility represented "the territory's first modernized school project since the hurricanes in 2017." She added, "It gives me pleasure as commissioner of Education to say that today is a tangible representation of the transformation at the V.I.D.E."

Mrs. Berry-Benjamin said despite being the smallest of all the school projects in the Virgin Islands, the C.A.H.S. Annex "represents what all of our schools will look like in the future," adding, "today ushers in a new era of the establishment of 21st century learning spaces in the U.S. Virgin Islands that will contribute to students' overall academic and social well being... It is our firm commitment to ensure that every child and teacher can work and learn in state-of-the-art spaces that are in compliance with latest industry standards."

She asked the public to "let today be a manifestation of what is to come."

Governor Albert Bryan complimented the Department of the Education. "We as government employees, as public servants... we are responsible for taking care of our citizens. It's that kind of dedication that you see when you see the D.O.E. come up here and talk about their dedication to students."

He stood up for Ms. Berry-Benjamin, who has received criticism from the public and the Legislature. "When you realize the tremendous task of a 36-year-old commissioner, who has the biggest department in the government with a \$180 million budget and recovery from a hurricane where even the new schools that were completed have problems... then just when you think you got it right you had a pandemic."



In closing, Mr. Bryan said, "Today is a little bit of inspiration for the long road we have to travel to get to where we are a shining example of what a territory can be."

Office of Disaster Recovery Director, Adrienne Williams-Octalien, said, "Word for today in my book is encouraged. I am encouraged because the path that we have taken to this point has not been easy... we are here this morning to demonstrate the hard work of the Virgin Islands Department of Education officials."

The O.D.R. director said the 2017 storms "provided an unprecedented amount of opportunity to repair and modernize. However this opportunity came with an unprecedented amount of maze and challenges and hoops that must be navigated in order to spend any dollar that came with it."

She added, "This is just the beginning. We have 42 other facilities... We have work ahead of us."

Cletis Clendinen, district director for Congresswoman Stacey Plaskett, explained how Ms. Plaskett's work in Washington, D.C. helped with projects. "We were able to work with our colleagues to get an agreement to bypass the provisions of the Stafford Act, which would only have allowed us to build back buildings and infrastructure only to pre-storm conditions." He said Ms. Plaskett argued that "if we are allowed to build things better to our newer codes and our modern standards...this should reduce future storm damages."

Ms. Wells-Herdington thanked the new New School Construction Board, which she said was created in 2019 and consists of forty-five members territory-wide. She added that the board came up with guiding principles so that the new facilities will follow the same building guidelines and include the same features territory-wide.

A pamphlet provided at the event thanked Custom Builders "for excellent workmanship and professionalism in the execution of this project."