

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Teachers' Unions Will Lead Dec. 18 Rallies Calling for Adequate Resources for Education

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Complex protesters prepare banner during all-day job action. By. Ernice Gilbert for the Virgin Islands Consortium

The St. Croix Federation of Teachers Local 1826 and St. Thomas-St. John Federation of Teachers Local 1825 are leading rallies on all three islands Dec. 18 to join with parents and community members to raise public awareness of the ongoing underfunding of public education in the U.S. Virgin Islands, a release the local chapters issued has made known.

"We will join with others who support our public schools to make our voices heard on what has become a perpetual funding gap that has literally brought education to a standstill in the territory," said Rosa Soto-Thomas, president of the St. Croix Federation of Teachers.

Educators across the Virgin Islands are calling on the Territorial government to provide the resources necessary to provide all children with the education they deserve, Mrs.Soto-Thomas said.

"It is long past time for our governor and legislators to begin moving the funding pendulum in the right direction," she said. "Many schools and other facilities need repairs that date to the hurricanes two years ago—or before."

"Our children are our future," said Carol Callwood, president of the St. Thomas-St. John Federation of Teachers. "And our elected leaders must step up and fund our future."

Ms. Callwood said that neglected maintenance and needed repairs have made most schools and activity centers potentially unhealthy places with poor air quality and environmental irritants, such as mold. Many schools and other facilities have continuous leaks, non-functioning air conditioners and poor ventilation because windows don't work or lack screens.

"Delays in hiring because of inadequate funding also mean that students face a shortage of teachers and other staff needed to provide the education our leaders promise them," Ms. Callwood said. "And in too many classrooms, our teachers lack the learning resources and materials their lessons require."

Ms. Callwood noted that at some schools, the lack of maintenance has left the grass on campuses to grow taller than some of the students.

According to the AFT, while the funding problem is has become drastic in the Virgin Islands, resources for public education have lagged behind needs across the United States over the last decade—a period of record economic growth. Half of all states spend less on K-12 public education than before the Great Recession. The Dec. 18 rallies grow out of the Fund Our Future campaign launched by the American Federation of Teachers, the national union with which the locals here are affiliated.

"We are demanding that those in power—or elected leaders—invest in our children's public schools and provide the resources our students need to succeed," Mr. Callwood said.

Mrs. Soto-Thomas said teachers and parents want to see progress toward ensuring all Virgin Islands children have the public schools that are staffed and equipped to provide the education that students deserve.

"If we want our students to thrive and succeed in today's society, we must correct the negligent disinvestment in our K-12 programs," Mrs. Soto-Thomas said. "Our schools have become dangerous places for our members and students to function in."

K-12 education in the Virgin Islands is no better off today than it was in 2011 when educators were terminated on account of misguided austerity measures that were

unnecessarily imposed by legislators and other government officials, Mrs. Soto-Thomas said. Meanwhile, she said, educators and their union are excluded from V.I. Department of Education discussions concerning much-needed major initiatives.

Too many of the promises made by elected officials have been broken or remain unfulfilled, Callwood said. “Educators are speaking out to hold our elected officials accountable for the horrendous state of K-12 education in the Territory. We must demand better. Allowing this to continue is a major social injustice,” she said.

Both leaders urged all stake holders turn out for the rallies on Dec. 18. All three will start at 4:30 p.m. The locations for each rally are:

- St. Thomas—Emancipation Garden, Legislature Building, Charlotte Amalie.
- St. Croix—Government House, Christiansted.
- St. John—Legislature Annex

“We must send a thunderclap to the powers that be,” they said. “The government needs to fund our future and keep its promises to the children we serve.”