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Education Blames Lack of Money as Reason for Inadequate Learning Resources as Unions Take to the Streets in Protest

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Staff Consortium **December 18, 2019**

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Teachers protested in 2018 for better working conditions and pay at the St. Croix Educational Complex. By. Ernice Gilbert for the Virgin Islands Consortium

The Dept. of Education on Tuesday issued a statement that blamed lack of funding for the inadequate learning resources that teachers across the territory have said are needed to do their jobs successfully. Today, the St. Croix Federation of Teachers Local 1826 and St. Thomas-St. John Federation of Teachers Local 1825 will lead rallies to join with parents and community members to raise public awareness of what the unions say is the ongoing underfunding of public education in the U.S. Virgin Islands.

According to the D.O.E. statement, the department has had to juggle meeting needs with federal and local dollars which still winds up not being enough.

"Our teachers are an essential part of the Department's operations; our students' social, emotional and academic development; and the future success of the Virgin Islands. The Department's position is always to support its teachers and schools by providing them with the tools they need to be successful, but, regrettably, with the sometimes-limited resources that we have," said D.O.E. in the statement.

It added, "We are keenly aware of the challenges teachers face in their classrooms and at their schools, many of which are older structures with significant, long-standing maintenance issues, compounded by the lack of classroom resources, in some instances. While we try to juggle meeting all of these needs with the local and federal dollars made available to us, these funds are never quite enough to adequately meet every need. We are often forced to make sacrifices in critical areas in order to keep our operations afloat. With that in mind, it is important to note that the Department of Education is not a revenue-generating entity; our allotted annual budget by the V.I. Legislature determines what we can and cannot do.

"One thing we can all agree on, however, is that we want what's best for our students and schools. We want our students and teachers to learn and work in safe, clean and well-funded environments that are conducive to learning. That's why the Department of Education has been working feverishly with its federal partners for more than two years to ensure that new and modern schools are built throughout the Territory. This stringent process is not without its own unique set of challenges, but we continue to forge ahead with the bright future of our students in mind."

D.O.E. said it remains committed to continue working "hand-in-hand with the members of Locals 1825 and 1826 as we make strides together to transform public education in the Virgin Islands. We are in this fight together."

In a release issued over the weekend, the A.F.T. unions said Educators across the Virgin Islands were calling on the territorial government to provide the resources necessary to provide all children with the education they deserve, according to Rosa Soto-Thomas, president of the St. Croix Federation of Teachers.

"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.”