

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Op-Ed | The Emergent State of Our Territory's Schools

Opinion / **Published On April 25, 2022 05:21 AM /**

Staff Consortium **April 25, 2022**



Jane E. Tuitt Elementary School By. THE V.I. DEPT. OF EDUCATION

I recently toured Jane E. Tuitt Elementary School on April 11 with Gov. Albert Bryan and his staff and heard one of the staff members comment, "I went to this school, you know?"

The staffer smiled about his glory days instead of commenting on the school's poor conditions such as the age, the playground or the fact that it looked like it did when he was a student. When I first walked into the school right after I was elected president of Local 1825, I wondered how that school was still functioning.

Located in Savan, Tuitt Elementary is the smallest school in the St. Thomas-St. John District. Many of the 225 students who attend speak English as a second language as

they are from either the Dominican Republic or Haiti. However, Principal Thelcia Bedminster and her teachers and staff are doing an excellent job of making students feel loved. She constantly lets them know they matter, despite the school's longtime challenges. The playground is in disrepair, and kids take their recesses in an unsafe concrete lot. The cafeteria is now a storage unit because of a lack of space and the roof has leaks. The school also has severe electrical wiring issues.

Tuitt Elementary is no different from the other 12 schools in this district with maintenance and infrastructure issues. Though it anticipates funding to rebuild but like the other schools in the St. Thomas-St. John District, it could use a little love and attention now.

When Locals 1825 and 1826 held our Day of Action demonstrations on April 20, we sent notices without a response. However, three legislators did join us when Local 1825 arrived at the Capitol Building to begin our protest. One came out to ask a few questions, and one legislator of the 15 elected later gave insight on how previous legislation – or lack thereof – should have addressed this a long time ago.

The 34th Legislature's Committee on Education and Workforce Development plans to hold an emergency hearing (after carnival) on May 2 to discuss the infrastructure of our public schools. We should always regard the betterment of our children's education as an emergency. Let us not make this hearing held at the taxpayers' expense a sideshow to direct blame at one person or department because this endeavor indeed takes a village. I ask all legislators assigned to this committee what their role is in ensuring the repair of schools. This question needs answering because these issues were here before your election, when your voters elected you and continue to go unresolved as you remain in office.

Modular buildings are the new norm for classrooms. These structures were supposed to be temporary. A lot of our school buildings have serious ventilation and mold issues. How can you breathe easy knowing these children cannot? How could you not know what is going on? Many of you live with, are related to and are friends with the same people who must show up every day.

When will our policymakers show up?

I implore you to focus on what we can do right now to make the academic environments more conducive to learning and less hazardous. Unfortunately, we cannot afford to let another year pass us by waiting for FEMA funding, whenever that will be.

Let us make decisions that we can afford to make now.

Submitted by: Leontyne Jones, president of the American Federation of Teachers St. Thomas-St. John Federation of Teachers Local Union 1825.