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Foodstuff Left to Rot in Trailers, Multiple Fire Hazards and More: Annual Safety Report Reveals Health and Safety Code Violations in V.I. Public Schools

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At the St. Croix Educational Complex, the "entire facility" was found to have leaking pipes, while the male locker rooms and restrooms featured exposed wiring and holes dug into the concrete walls, according to a Board of Education report. By. ERNICE GILBERT/ V.I. CONSORTIUM

A number of schools in the U.S. Virgin Islands are so unfit for purpose that they should be demolished, according to the V.I. Fire Service, which recently published a comprehensive report that included information about life-threatening safety violations that exist in several of the territory's school plants.

The Fire Service's report forms part of the V.I. Board of Education's 179-page assessment of public schools in the VI for the 2021-2022 school year. The annual assessment is based on school walkthroughs, ancillary agency reports, and the V.I. Dept. of Education's responses to inquiries.

For its part, the Fire Service inspected and reported on seven elementary schools, one high school and one vocational school, all in the St. Croix district, and found that the majority of these institutions had at least one health violation.

Henry Joseph, St. Croix Fire Marshal, wrote that the schools were in deplorable condition with multiple code violations, and said that it was his honest and professional recommendation that they be torn down and rebuilt in line with the most recent health, fire, life safety, and national electrical codes that are in force.

Some schools were found with code violations which had been previously reported to Dept. of Education officials, such as John H. Woodson Jr. High School, which has no fire extinguisher system, no fire alarm system, and no smoke detectors, according to the report.

"There are areas on the campus where the emergency strobe lights and alarm boxes are hanging by the wires," the report reads in part. The extinguisher in the wood working classroom was expired, and the V.I. Fire Service noted several hazards, including wires hanging from an electrical box, and numerous flammable substances such as solvents and paints left exposed on work tables without supervision.

At the St. Croix Educational Complex, the "entire facility" was found to have leaking pipes, while the male locker rooms and restrooms featured exposed wiring and holes dug into the concrete walls.

Other schools did not have sufficient means of egress which would allow occupants of the buildings to escape during a fire emergency. Faulty alarm systems were also a concern along with fire extinguishers that needed to be serviced and, in some cases, exit signs and emergency lights were found to be either non-functional or non-existent.

Apart from the fire hazards, the report detailed concerns about safety issues that were discovered. At some schools, intercoms were either missing or non-existent throughout the entire campus. Surveillance cameras have stood non-operational since the 2017 hurricanes. Schools have limited practice drills for active shooter lock downs and earthquakes, among other hazards.

The merger of school campuses in both districts was an issue of significant concern for the Board of Education, which explained that it found "no evidence of a clear plan to address the excessive school fights and school safety." The report found that the existing security challenges that come with the territory's open campuses are heightened by poorly maintained infrastructure — downed fences, broken doors and gates.

Principals who forwarded repair requests to the maintenance division had no ability to track the progress of those requests or estimate when the requested repairs would be attended to or completed. The Board of Education's report stated that school administrators were "not notified when contractors are scheduled to execute work systematically." Other areas of neglect include lack of adequate storage, leaks, lighting, and deep cleaning, to name a few. The number of issues requiring attention is extensive — replacing ceiling tiles, restroom faucets, toilets, and kitchen equipment (including walk-in coolers and freezers), are just a small fraction.

Not only did the Board of Education find that problems within the territory's school plants are numerous and serious, but that there was no real plan to address them. The report noted the absence of a specific detailed rollout plan for 2022 summer repairs prior to reopening for the new school year. No plan for vehicle maintenance, to upkeep air conditioners, kitchen or vocational equipment. Further compounding matters is the lack of skilled maintenance staff. The report found inadequate numbers of electricians, plumbers, and carpenters in each educational district.

Apart from the Fire Service's dismal assessment of the safety and upkeep of the school infrastructure, the V.I. Department of Health also raised concerns about food safety in the territory's public school system. After concerned citizens reported a foul smell emanating from food trailers in the yard of the old Curriculum Center, a Dept. of Health inspection of those trailers found foodstuffs owned by the School Food Authority that was "smelly, moldy with weevils, outdated, and slimy." The items were destroyed following that inspection.

Even despite the myriad problems outlined and highlighted by this report, the board's assessment of the state of the territory's public schools is still incomplete. That's because there's no record that the required annual air and water testing stipulated by law has been performed by the Occupational Safety and Hazard Administration and the Department of Planning and Natural Resources. As such, environmental concerns remain unaddressed. In fact, the Fire Service and the Department of Health were the only two ancillary agencies that responded to the Board of Education's request for a comprehensive assessment and evaluation of all public schools. The Departments of Planning and Natural Resources, and the V.I. Dept. of Public Works failed to perform as requested.

The Board of Education also expressed concern over the monitoring and subsequent reporting on the progress of students participating in Special Education programs as well as in the V.I. Virtual Academy (VIVA).

Moving forward, and as part of its recommendation to the V.I. Legislature, to whom it will eventually present its findings, the Board of Education has recommended that responses from the Department of Education be prioritized, especially those related to health, safety, security and regulatory compliance.

The board said it also continues to support the establishment of a maintenance budget for each school in both districts to fund maintenance and project completion. For full report is [here](#).

Correction: July 5, 2022 at 2:16 p.m.

A previous version of this story, because of an error, stated that the V.I. Dept. of Health's Environmental Health Division did not provide requested documents to the V.I. Board of Education. That's incorrect. The division did submit requested documents, as seen in Appendix C of the V.I. B.O.E. report - Environmental Health Reports in the link above. We've updated the story to reflect the correct information.