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## Education Commissioner Shares Vision for New Schools, Plan to Address Teacher Shortage

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Elesha George **August 05, 2022**

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**Dr. Dionne Wells-Hedrington was named commissioner of Education by Governor Albert Bryan Jr. on Wed. Aug. 3, 2022. By. V.I. CONSORTIUM**

Dr. Dionne Wells-Hedrington, the newest education commissioner nominee for the V.I. Dept. of Education has her eyes set on creating a “welcoming environment” for students and teachers when school reopens on August 8.

Speaking to Lieutenant Governor Tregenza Roach during Thursday’s Press Box program, Ms. Wells-Hedrington addressed challenges and opportunities for improvement in the public-school education system.

Among the improvements envisioned is the construction of new school buildings in the upcoming months.

The new Arthur Richards Pre-K to Grade 8 school will be demolished within weeks, according to the commissioner nominee and will benefit from an independent study on how furniture impacts teaching and learning.

According to the Ms. Wells-Hedrington, the USVI will engage with an “independent partner” this year to carry out that study.

“They donated the furniture and they wanted to do a study to see how our students respond. How does the furniture impact teaching and learning and that data that we gather from that will help to drive what we put in the new Arthur Richards because we want to make sure that the furniture compliments what we want to see in the vision forward for our schools,” she explained.

The new Arthur Richards school is expected to be constructed within three years or more based on factors that may affect construction.

Meantime, the Charlotte Amalie High School is currently going through an asbestos abatement process and is expected to be demolished within two months.

“Right now, at Charlotte we are going through the asbestos abatement process, all the permitting and so forth that is required,” Ms. Wells-Hedrington noted, adding that, “We had to hire an archeologist because there may be artifacts under the buildings when we start to demolish and part of our requirements with DPNR and our federal partners is that we have persons there just in case there are artifacts that need to be preserved.”

She committed to building these two schools in addition to the Julius Sprauve School on St John before retirement, noting that for Julius Sprauve, “this time it’s going to be a reality.”

Alongside these much-needed infrastructural changes in education, the commissioner nominee will also have to contend with maintaining aged facilities and last-minute teacher resignation and retirement.

“We have 27 of 32 campuses that are passed their lifecycle – 40 years. And so, a lot of the work that our maintenance division is doing is really trying to rehab and keep alive those buildings until we’re able to repair them permanently or replace in some cases.”

Ms. Wells-Hedrington said the age of those buildings make it hard to predict what will happen, stating that “in any given day we may have an emergency that we never predicted.”

She said the rehabilitation process is also delayed by a lack of “responsive bidders” for the projects, citing that contractors are limited. “Every single department has some type of construction project taking place so you’re picking from a limited pool and then we have issues with bonding, we have issues with paper work and so sometimes we come across hindrances.”

Moreover, within these campuses are the teachers who are routinely leaving the public school system. The commissioner said 100 teachers were hired during the summer but she anticipates that more will leave when school reopens.

“We still have some vacancies and we anticipate more vacancies because people wait until the end of August to retire or resign,” she said, sharing that since taking up the position one day ago, two

educators have resigned.

Of the 300 people who have reached the age of separation in the education department, Ms. Wells-Hedrington said more than 150 are teachers.

She also noted a compounded issue where students are becoming less likely to choose studies as educators.

However, there is a plan to use virtual learning to fill these gaps which gives the education department time to recruit more teachers in September. Virtual instruction for children who fall ill with Covid-19 is also an option that can be adopted by each school.

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