

Lawmakers Vote to Establish School Construction and Maintenance Bureau in U.S. Virgin Islands

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The maintenance of school infrastructure across the territory, long a prickly subject, could now receive focused attention after lawmakers voted to establish a Bureau of School Construction and Maintenance.

Currently, the task is the responsibility of the Virgin Islands Department of Education. The change is meant to allow D.O.E to focus more on curriculum and academics. All seven senators on the Budget, Appropriations and Finance Committee, chaired by Senator Donna Frett-Gregory, voted in favor of assigning the task of school repairs and maintenance to the new Bureau instead.

The new agency will be headed by an executive director appointed by the governor, whose responsibility will include acquiring property for the construction of schools, constructing new

schools, and executing maintenance and repairs.

At a time when several of the territory's schools are in disrepair and when plans for new construction are ongoing, Education Commissioner Dionne Wells-Hedrington said that she was not against the measure in principle, but insisted that the Bureau must work closely with D.O.E. to collaborate on decisions.

"I really need it to be very defined in the roles and responsibilities of the Bureau" ... "I think it's critical that everything be outlined as clear as we can so that you don't leave any room for any subjectivity," Mrs. Wells-Hedrington told lawmakers.

"We are still going to be accountable to those that we serve, so it's imperative that that collaborative, cohesive relationship is established. I'm going to have to account to unions and so I have to make sure that the executive director's goals and objectives align to where the department wants to go," she said.

The bureau will also be responsible for developing a 20-year master school construction, maintenance and capital plan which would replace the Education Maintenance Fund and attract an appropriation of \$2.5 million annually.

That amount is still significantly short of the \$15 million that Chaneil Callwood-Daniels, D.O.E.'s architect said is required for school maintenance. The \$15 million figure includes funding for emergency, preventive, as well as routine maintenance. According to the Mrs. Wells-Hedrington, the department's maintenance budget has been severely underfunded for the past seven to ten years as department has only received \$2 million annually for that purpose, with additional monies appropriated during the summer months.

The sponsor of the bill, [numbered 35-0050](#) is hoping the measure will improve the upkeep of school buildings as well as address the issue of learning loss. "We are bringing the spotlight on education. We are holding every single leader that's elected in this territory accountable for how our buildings look in the future," stated bill sponsor Frett-Gregory.

A review panel consisting of the St. Croix Insular Superintendent, the St. Thomas/St. John Insular Superintendent, and the members of the Virgin Islands Board of Education will be formed to prepare and manage the plan.