

COMMITTEE UPDATED ON THE STATUS OF EDUCATION POST-HURRICANES

Date : April 3, 2018

St. Thomas – The Committee of Education, Youth, and Recreation, chaired by Sen. Jean Forde, held a meeting at the Capitol Building on Tuesday, to receive testimony from education officials, on the status of the educational programs and facilities post-Hurricane Irma and Hurricane Maria. However, the written testimony submitted by the Commissioner of the Department of Education Sharon McCollum stated that Governor Kenneth Mapp gave a directive preventing education leaders from attending the meeting today.

“We have done our best to bring all of the stakeholders to this committee meeting. We learned yesterday that officials from the Department of Education (DOE) will not be available until April 13th as instructed by the Governor,” said Sen. Forde. “I cannot see the justification for canceling today. This was a follow-up of from the school tours previously conducted in both districts.”

Although officials from the Department of Education were absent, leaders from the American Federation of Teachers were present to share an update.

President of the St. Thomas-St. John Federation of Teachers (AFT) Carol Callwood stated that some classrooms have roof damage; air condition units need repairs and there are continued reports of mold and asbestos. “The cost and time needed to properly clean and repair the schools and activity centers before classes resume for the 2018-2019 school year have not been identified or at least have not been shared with us,” said President Callwood.

Similarly, Rosa Soto-Thomas, President of the St. Croix Federation of Teachers said, “Currently, in the St. Croix District, we continue to house thirteen schools in five buildings. Members who work during the afternoon sessions have reported that they have overstayed their welcome at assigned schools and are eager to return to their home school or temporary modular units.” Additional woes include extending the Collective Bargaining Agreement daily with the Government of the Virgin Islands which expired on August 31, 2015, to-date teacher’s salaries are based on the 2010-2011 pay scale and teachers are denied combined sick, personal and annual leaves.

“In previous meetings, the Commissioner stated that schools will be ready for the 2018-2019 school year. Where did you get the information from that schools will not be ready,” asked Sen. Nouvelle Francis. In response, Carver Farrow, President of STT-STJ of EAA Union said, “I want to believe that all efforts are made by DOE to prepare for the upcoming school year. However, the best scenario is to order, set-up and make ready the modular structures by September 2018 and I hardly believe this will happen in the next five months.” Sen. Myron Jackson said, “We have to come to grips with long-term planning for our schools.”

Sen. Forde stated that the Education System in the Virgin Islands is not in a happy place. “Months after the storms, modular units should already be in place. On St. John, the modular units could be placed in the ballfield. On St. Thomas, the modular units could fill the grounds at the University of the Virgin Islands. Classrooms still aren’t ready for the 2018-2019 school year. Teachers are still lacking necessary resources. How long will this continue? We have concerns,” said Sen. Forde.

Senators present are Jean Forde, Novelle Francis, Kurt Vialet, Tregenza Roach, Neville James, Myron Jackson and Janelle Sarauw. PHOTOS: <http://www.legvi.org/committeemeetings/Media/>

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