

COMMITTEE UPDATED ON THE STATUS OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS EDUCATION SYSTEM POST HURRICANE IRMA AND HURRICANE MARIA

Date : February 28, 2018

St. Thomas – The Committee of Education, Youth, and Recreation, chaired by Sen. Jean Forde, held a meeting at the Capitol Building on Wednesday, to receive testimony from education officials, on the status of the schools and education system post-Hurricane Irma and Hurricane Maria.

“There is 2.5 million square foot of our public education system has suffered irreparable damage, some of which can be seen today and that will surface years later,” said Sharon McCollum, Ph.D., Commissioner of V.I. Department of Education (VIDOE). Currently, there are eight schools condemned territory-wide. There are two schools in St. Thomas-St. John District and six schools in the St. Croix District that were damaged extensively. The Curriculum Center and Procurement Warehouse also sustained similar fate.

“How was the assessment of the condemned schools conducted?” inquired Sen. Forde. Commissioner McCollum stated that the Army Corp of Engineers and VIDOE maintenance division and engineering team collaborated to conduct assessments.

As a result of the condemned schools, VIDOE are holding double sessions to ensure public school students are receiving an adequate education. Commissioner McCollum stated that on the St. Thomas-St. John District, Addelita Cancryn students, are on double sessions with Charlotte Amalie High School. Students at the Gladys Abraham Elementary School are using the Ulla F. Muller Elementary School. On the St. Croix District, the John H. Woodson Junior High School and Elena Christian Junior High School will continue the double session with Central High School.

“Will students still meet the requirement of 1080 school hours with the double sessions?” asked Sen. Positive Nelson. Commissioner McCollum said, “Adjustments made to our calendar will assist the Department in supporting our students in meeting 180 instructional days, not 1080 hours.”

Sen. Brian Smith asked, "What is the total number of students in both districts post-hurricanes?" Commissioner McCollum stated that there are 3,304 students in the St. Thomas-St. John District. Colleen Williams, Insular Superintendent for the St. Croix District, shared that there are approximately 2,000 enrolled students.

Collectively, senators inquired about an assessment for mold remediation in the schools. "The mobilization of my team will commence in the next 72 hours for mold assessment and remediation," responded Nicole Bootman-Shepard, Disaster Recovery Expert for A.E. Com. Commissioner McCollum added that meanwhile school administrators and school nurses are documenting mold related incidents. All persons are encouraged to report rooms with mold and they are immediately relocated from the alleged infected room or area.

However, Carol Callwood, President of the St. Thomas-St. John Federation of Teachers believes that the schools are not ready to open. "I questioned the safety of the job sites with the presence of mold and the impact that it will have on the health and staff of our students."

Committee Members present are senators Jean Forde, Novelle Francis, Kurt Vialet, Tregenza Roach, Brian Smith. Non-Committee senators are Dwayne DeGraff, Janelle Sarauw, Positive Nelson.