

VIRGIN ISLANDS DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION SHARES STATUS OF SCHOOL READINESS FOR UPCOMING SCHOOL YEAR

Date : August 16, 2017

St. Thomas – The Committee on Education, Youth, and Recreation chaired by Sen. Jean Forde held a meeting at the Capitol Building on Wednesday, to receive testimony from officials from the Department of Education on the status of the Virgin Islands Education System for the 2017-2018 academic year.

“The purpose of this meeting is to discuss the readiness of the school facilities that will accommodate teachers and students for the upcoming school year,” said Sen. Forde. “The committee has not done the annual school tour because we are familiar with the activity or lack of activity that took place in the schools. Two weeks ago, monies that were appropriated for summer maintenance was released. Therefore, little activity has occurred.”

The Virgin Islands Department of Education (DOE) had to prioritize the maintenance projects for the 2017-2018 school year because of budget restraints.

Charlesworth McCarthy, Director, Maintenance and Plant Operations for the St. Thomas-St. John District for DOE said, “We conduct preventative maintenance for some of our facilities, which can be categorized as routine, mandatory, and regulated services totaling \$815,182. The monies were used to cover the cost of grease trap services, water testing, landscaping, and fire extinguisher re-certifications.”

Additional repairs and maintenance projects included electrical upgrades, air condition replacements, bathroom renovations, and general repairs and maintenance. Kitchen equipment servicing, pest control applications, and janitorial activities were also completed in preparation for the upcoming school year, according to Director McCarthy.

“From 1-5, one being the highest and five being the lowest, how will you rate school readiness for the 2017-2018 school year?” asked Sen. Smith. Joseph Sibilly, Territorial Director, Maintenance and Plant Operations of DOE stated that he will rate it at two because schools in both districts are ready for the upcoming school year.

However, Sen. Forde stated that the schools may not be ready because funds for maintenance projects were recently released. “If schools are ready yet the money was granted just two weeks ago, that must mean there wasn’t much work to be done then,” said Sen. Forde. “I don’t know how the schools are ready when the heat in the classrooms are unbearable because of the lack of functioning air conditioners. We still have a lot of work to do to assist with providing a functioning

classroom environment.”

Separately, the Virgin Islands Board of Education (VIBE) conducted the 2016-2017 School Management Accountability Report. This is a thorough annual assessment and evaluation of public school facilities, school guidance division and school administration in the territory; stated Emmett Hansen, Associate Executive Director of VIBE.

“Based on the report, how would you grade the school system from A to F?” asked Sen. Brian Smith. Kyza Callwood, Member of VIBE said, “I would give it a C because there is always room for improvement.” Sen. Smith further inquired, “What are some of your concerns?” Callwood stated that some of his concerns are that teachers need a raise, maintenance issues, outdated textbooks and there are mold and mosquitos in some classrooms.

Due to the lack of funds, all the challenges that the schools are facing cannot be addressed. “Can you identify the top three problems in the school system?” asked Sen. Forde. Callwood stated that the technological status of the schools and computer accessibility needs to be upgraded, the School Lunch Program and more supplies/resources are needed.

Sen. Tregenza Roach stated that academic achievement needs to play a major role in the Management and Accountability Report.

“The report focuses heavily on maintenance issues. However, there is minimal information on instruction and academic improvement,” said Sen. Roach. “The report should include strengths and weaknesses such as the percentage of college entrances, school dropout rate, and the number of students who passed and failed the Smarter Balance Test.”

“Is there a strategic plan that VIBE has in targeting areas such as revising policies, education curriculum and moving our education system into the 21st century?” asked Sen. Janelle Sarauw. Director Hansen said, “There is quite a bit of work that needs to be done in the Department of Education. VIBE is working on changing policies, creating awareness to administrators and providing mediation for students who are bullied.

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