Updates on Recovery/Rebuild of the Territory’s School Facilities Infrastructure
Good Morning, Honorable Janelle K. Sarauw, Chairwoman of the Committee on Disaster Recovery and Infrastructure, members of the Committee, other members of the 34th Legislature, other testifiers, and the listening and viewing audiences. I am Racquel Berry-Benjamin, Commissioner of the Virgin Islands Department of Education (VIDE). I am pleased to present to you an update on the exciting work underway within the Department relative to our recovery efforts from the 2017 storms, specifically, updates on the Recovery/Rebuild of the Territory’s School Facilities Infrastructure.

Here with me to provide updates are the following members of the VIDE’s Operations Unit, who lead this work on a daily basis:

- Dr. Dionne Wells-Hedrington – Chief Operations Officer
- Chaneel Callwood-Daniels – Architect
- Joseph Sibilly – Territorial Facilities Manager
- James Bernier – Engineer
- Alan Fleming – Project Engineer

By evidence of a well-rounded curriculum, the Department of Education seeks to educate the whole child—mind, body, and soul. Equally important to the curriculum are the buildings or educational facilities in which students learn and teachers teach. These environments contribute significantly to the learning process, and overall growth and development of students.

Students’ academic performance and employee morale can be adversely impacted when buildings are not conducive to learning. This understanding is at the forefront of the tireless work of the VIDE’s Operations Unit. It is what fuels our passion to rectify the long-standing facilities maintenance issues the Department has faced over the last 30 years, primarily due to a lack of funding, as well as to actualize new, modern and flexible learning spaces for USVI public school students.

Hurricane’s Irma and Maria, as devastating as they were, have given the Department of Education unprecedented access to financial resources through FEMA’s Public Assistance program that will help the Department address the critical infrastructural needs that exist in our schools and offices territory-wide. Indeed, behind every gray cloud there is a silver lining.

Today’s testimony will show the magnitude of the Department’s diligence to ensure our readiness to take full advantage of the opportunities made available through our federal partners in refurbishing our current facilities and/or constructing new ones.

**Our presentation is comprised of four parts:**
1. Background information
2. The FEMA process
3. The Facility Master Plan development
4. The Facility Master Plan implementation
Part I - Background Information:

VIDE by the Numbers:

The VIDE’s current footprint consists of 43 sites with a total square footage of 2,734,485 feet. There are approximately 10,000 students, territory-wide, participating in the learning experience in PreK-12th grade. In the St. Croix District, there are 3,741 PreK-8th graders and 1,742 9th-12th graders. In the St. Thomas-St. John District, there are 3,278 PreK-8th graders and 1,705, 9th-12th graders. Due to the 2017 storms, our campuses sustained significant damage. Four of our facilities were completely destroyed and are unusable—these are Arthur A. Richards Junior High School, Addelita Cancryn Junior High School, Julius E. Sprauve K-9th and the Curriculum Center in St. Thomas.

Challenges:

The challenge is getting the permanent projects obligated. We are currently in the final stages of negotiating the cost for the New Arthur Richards with FEMA.

Lowering Costs:

Funding challenges have been analyzed by the VIDE through the assessment of the current conditions of our facilities. We realize that if an analysis of the local funding allocated to the Department does not increase, we will continue to address only a small portion of our maintenance concerns on an as-need basis. Ideally, the Department is in need of both an emergency maintenance fund and a routine maintenance fund. It is the Department’s position that this has to be a separate funding stream solely allocated for the maintenance of the footprint of VIDE, and that is available at all times to address the needs on a continuous basis. We are open and available to enter into discussions with this Body, as we all want the best conditions for our students and the employees of VIDE.

Currently, the national average cost per square foot to maintain school buildings is estimated at $5 for planning purposes with a 1.5 multiplier to account for added shipping costs for our geographic location in the Virgin Islands, which equates to $7.50 per square foot or $20,508,638 per year needed to adequately maintain our facilities at national standards. The VIDE, in its disaster recovery work, has proposed to reduce its footprint from 45 sites to 23 sites through consolidations in order to make the square footage more manageable while still meeting the needs of the community.

The reduction in the square footage with a lower square foot maintenance cost for new facilities of $6 ($4 cost since the facilities would be new with the 1.5% location multiplier) would bring the existing maintenance and operations funding requirement down to $13,617,736 per year. The Facilities Master Plan, when fully built out, would reduce the annual maintenance need by $7 million or more. Implementing the Facilities Master Plan reduces our management need from approximately $21 million
a year to $14 million a year. Our existing allotment for maintenance and operations cost is $3 million and that would need to be increased through a dedicated funding source. These projects reduce the footprint to a manageable size, but more so gives the Department the flexibility to utilize the funding received through the Public Assistance program to address concerns territory-wide in all of our schools.

**Operations Structure:**

Under the current administration, the Operations Division was formed to provide an organized unit to coordinate the operations within the Department. This structure includes having a chief operations officer who manages new schools construction, instructional technology office, engineering office and facilities management. Having this cohesive structure allows for the development of a culture of collaboration that provides opportunities for strategic planning and projections in those critical areas that affect the overall services provided to our school communities.

The Operations Division plans to increase its personnel to accommodate the increase in projects coming online in the near future, utilizing the administrative cost received from the obligated project worksheets. Additional positions expected in the division include Disaster Recovery Specialists in both districts that would be required to request and review backup documentation for pay applications and process administrative paperwork timely; Disaster Recovery Monitoring and Compliance Senior Manager responsible for the preparation of CDBG-DR Local match applications, review of Davis-Bacon reports from contractors for compliance, quality control of pay applications, backup documentation, reimbursement packages, as well as oversight over the DR specialists; Disaster Recovery Project Managers in both districts to focus on organizing the project, holding weekly meetings with contractors, reviewing and approving material submittals, responding to requests for information, reviewing and averting potential change orders, punch list inspections, monitoring progress and controlling costs; and a Disaster Recovery Software Developer that would build or customize and maintain websites and database repositories to ensure all VIDE blueprints, plans, field notes, project meeting notes, and agendas are uploaded into a searchable, digital repository, perform website management and management of all software relative to recovery projects, including keeping licenses up to date.

Building capacity within the Division will give us a better vantage point to ensure that deliverables, as agreed upon in contracts, are being executed with fidelity. We inherited many issues with our temporary modular campus installations because of a lack of proper management and personnel. Lessons have been learned and our goal is to ensure these issues are not repeated with the permanent work.

**Part II - FEMA Process:**

The FEMA process is complicated and time-consuming. Receiving grants from FEMA requires resources and effort, especially to maximize the benefits to the Virgin Islands. The VIDE has established a close working relationship with the GVI’s Office of Disaster Recovery that facilitates this process. FEMA provides an additional amount to sub-grantees, such as the VIDE, of five percent (5%) of the
obligated funds in order to support the states and territories going through the process of applying for
FEMA assistance. These funds are placed in a separate Project Worksheet (PW) in Category Z (Cat Z).
The funds do not appear as a check, instead the funds are retrieved in two ways: payments for resources
and the necessary tools and staff to assist the VIDE in administering the approximately $1.5 billion
capital projects that are needed.

Staff will perform necessary functions including, but not limited to, reviewing and approving invoices
and certifying them for payment; holding weekly project meetings; requesting and reviewing backup
documentation for pay applications ensure compliance; accompanying VITEMA on site visits to validate
PWs; prepare CDBG-DR Local Match applications; review Davis-Bacon reports from contractors for
compliance; prepare Cat Z reimbursement requests; performing inspections; updating schedules; and
other duties.

These fully reimbursable federally funded positions have been submitted for inclusion in the
Department’s Fiscal Year 2022 and 2023 budget, please support them. The VIDE respectfully advocates
for support for these federally funded positions to ensure that we effectively manage our funding and the
work being performed at our facilities.

The positions, along with the continued support of consultants, are needed to effectively and successfully
manage the process and maximize the benefit of FEMA funds to serve VIDE students. The next few
slides will give insight into the work that is involved in the three key aspects of the FEMA process
relative to VIDE:

- Temporary Project Highlights;
- Amount of Awards – How the amounts are calculated;
- Workflow Steps – How awards are obligated and how projects are implemented; and
- Creating New Schools – Permanent Work

**Temporary Project Highlights:**

Temporary projects under FEMA Category “A” and “B” were developed soon after the storms to enable
the VIDE to make emergency repairs and construct temporary buildings. Approximately $160 million
has been obligated. This amount is changing as FEMA is reversioning PWs to capture additional work.
Seventy-four percent (74%) of the obligated funding has been drawn down and most of the rest is
committed. The largest temporary projects are funded by PW 155 and PW 121 for modular units,
including entire campuses at Arthur Richards, Julius Sprauve and Charlotte Amalie High School. Work
was completed at various campuses throughout the territory. The last temporary project is the Temporary
Curriculum Center on St. Thomas that will be located in the Gramboko Building. Plans are being
prepared and the scope of work will be placed out for bid shortly. The VIDE expects to have this project
well underway by the fall and ready for at the end of this year. The superintendent’s offices will be
located at the Gramboko Building until the permanent Curriculum Center is built.
**Cash Flow:**

Funding the recovery requires constant vigilance. The timing of project Notice to Proceed and therefore project completion is tied to the availability of funds. Without funding, the contracts cannot be signed to enable the work to begin. CDBG-DR funds are available to pay the 10 percent local match.

**Amount of Awards:**

Thanks to Congress, the amount of awards to the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico are eligible for funding to repair disaster-related damage and mitigate damage from future storms. Congress included a provision in the Bi-Partisan Budget Act (BBA) to provide additional funding to replace or repair facilities with pre-disaster damage and to build back to Industry Standards. The need exceeds $1 billion.

**Workflow Steps:**

VIDE staff and consultants have been working to shepherd projects through the steps to obligation:

- **DDD Approval** *(drafts were submitted to FEMA in September 2019)*
- **Site Inspection Report** *(most SIRs were completed by FEMA in March 2020)*
- **Facility Assessment** *(these detailed assessments started in July 2020 and are now compiled and going through our final review. The assessment of Arthur Richards campus allowed the VIDE to provide detailed responses to FEMA quantifying BBA elements to increase the amount of the cost estimate)*
- **Collaborative process to identify BBA scope and cost to address deferred maintenance issues and meet Industry Standards** *(only one collaboration has been held so far for the Arthur Richards JHS)*
- **Fixed Cost Offer** *(the VIDE has seen a draft cost estimate for Arthur Richards from FEMA and is awaiting the final Cost Estimating Format (CEF) from the FEMA Consolidated Resource Center (CRC) group)*
- **Obligated Project Worksheet (PW)** *(once the VIDE accepts an offer, the PW goes through a multi-step approval process over several months until FEMA obligates the funds)*

Project implementation is tied to the obligation of the PW. If the VIDE were to wait until each PW is obligated to begin design and wait until design is complete to begin construction, the recovery period would be even longer than it already is. In order to deliver relief more quickly, the VIDE has taken steps to fast-track some of its projects that lend themselves to fast track. The project implementation steps are:

- **Prepare Bridging Documents** *(consists of schematic designs and cost estimates)*
- **Prepare Solicitation Documents** *(RFQs and RFPs)*
- **Solicit architects and contractors** *(Design-build, CMAR or traditional)*
Creating New Schools:

The VIDE’s Operations Division is working together with the community on planning the recovery of our schools and planning for the next generation of facilities. Our children need to be on a level playing field, ready to lead and compete successfully for jobs of the future. The VIDE is at the beginning of the process of designing and building new schools and modernizations throughout the territory.

Part III – Facility Master Plan (FMP):

Facility master plans are developed as a best practice when entities embark on capital improvement programs that involve major work to build new schools and modernize educational facilities. The VIDE’s Chief Operations Officer drives the advisory board that has assisted the VIDE in developing its first comprehensive education facilities master plan. This plan was presented to the public by Governor Albert Bryan Jr, Commissioner Racquel Berry-Benjamin, and Chief Operations Officer Dr. Dionne Wells-Hedrington in June of 2020. The plan is the culmination of 18 months of work by the advisory board, which first developed guiding principles and assisted the VIDE in developing Industry Standards. The advisory board developed and vetted consolidations and reviewed information on enrollment projections. The planning process involved the inclusion of the community at key points with the holding of a series of public meetings.

Advisory Board and Charge:

The Virgin Islands Department of Education formed the New Schools Construction Advisory Board, comprised of internal and external stakeholders in January of 2019, to guide and shape the future development and care of educational facilities in the territory. The Advisory Board comprises of:

1. VIDE leadership, Operations unit, instructional staff, students, and parents
2. Collective Bargaining Units
3. UVI
4. Non-profit representatives
5. Partnering agencies (WAPA, DSPR, DPNR, etc.)
6. Private Sector Leaders
7. Senators
8. Governor’s Office
Guiding Principles:

The FMP Guiding Principles were developed by Advisory Board members during joint meetings of the St. Croix and the St. Thomas/St. John groups. These principles reflect a holistic approach to 21st century learning and call for the integration of facility with pedagogy. The members proposed radical shifts to make our approach student-centered. The Guiding Principles are:

- **Whole child**
  - School designs will integrate academic and co-curricular spaces and be tailored to the learning styles of students at the Pre-K level and continue to be child-focused to enable students to experience self-directed, self-paced learning to prepare students to function in millennial higher education and workplace environments.

- **Equity**
  - The educational facilities master plan ensures there is a balance in the quality of resources between current schools and new schools.

- **Addressing the needs of all students and integrating technology**
  - Our schools serve students from diverse cultures and communities and no matter where the student is based or where their education occurs, their education will still be forward looking, high-quality and world class.

- **Using technology to assess the impact of practices**
  - Space will be provided that is adequate in relation to not only enrollment projections, but also suitable to support educational innovation and advancements for 21st century learning environments. Schools are nexus points that shape our communities, which in-turn shape our schools. To strengthen this nexus, it will be important to collect and maintain relevant data.

- **Health, safety, and security**
  - Best practices will be employed in the design, construction, maintenance and operation of all facilities, including prevention and intervention measures to address academic and behavioral issues/concerns.

- **Cultural, local, and economic competence and resilience**
  - Planning, design and construction efforts will embody cultural, local and economic competence and resilience by:
    - Vernacular architecture being incorporated into designs
    - Local and M/WBE participation in design and construction being encouraged and tracked with goals.
    - Vocational programs and opportunities for certification

- **Integrated design, assessment, operation, and management**
  - Use factual and current data related to existing conditions of facilities, their suitability to support 21st century learning, and resiliency to inform the need for repair, renovation and/or replacement. New and modernized schools will employ integrated design, assessment, operation and management principles in new and existing buildings.
**Industry Standards (Highlights):**

The VIDE worked with the Advisory Board and held workshops with local architects, the Virgin Islands Chapter of the American Institute of Architects (AIA) and the national leadership of the AIA Committee on Education to develop Industry Standards for Virgin Islands public schools.

A first for the VIDE, the Industry Standards, which have been approved by FEMA, provide the performance standards and specifications that buildings must meet. The standards are based on national standards and best practices for school planning and construction, space requirements for children under age seven, safe schools, and guidelines to create safe, secure and welcoming learning environments. The Industry Standards address earthquakes, floods and high winds.

The Advisory Board provided guidance and ranked more than a dozen values. Among the highest ranked values were those related to health and comfort. If a student is not in a healthy state and comfortable, his or her learning will suffer. The Industry Standards include provisions to address thermal environmental conditions, lighting, daylighting, OSHA requirements, and acoustics.

**Consolidation:**

The St. Croix District superintendent proposed and implemented PreK-8 consolidations, which are incorporated into and supported by the FMP. The PreK-8 model creates smaller learning environments for middle school-aged students that offers many benefits. The PreK-8 model has begun implementation in the St. Thomas-St. John District with the Julius E. Sprauve PreK-8 School on St. John leading the way followed by the Cancryn 4-8 School on St. Thomas, which is adjacent to and shares kitchen facilities with the Lockhart K-3 School. The consolidations allow the VIDE to reduce its footprint and as a result, its future maintenance and operations costs, as explained in Part I of this presentation.

Feedback from the community at the public meetings held in October 2019 was overwhelmingly positive.

In the St. Croix District, the number of facilities is reduced from 22 to 9:
- Five PreK-8 Schools (Claude O. Markoe, Arthur Richards at Evelyn Williams, Alfredo Andrews, Juanita Gardine and Pearl B. Larsen)
- One Specialty High School (Central HS)
- One Comprehensive High School (Complex w/CTEC)
- One Discovery Center (Woodson)
- One Administration Center

In St. Thomas-St. John District, the number of facilities is reduced from 24 to 12:
- Two PreK-3 Schools (Sibilly and Tuit feeding into Bowsky and Muller)
Five PreK-8 Schools (Bowsky, Muller, Oliver, Boschulte and Cancryn-Lockhart)
- One Specialty High School (Kean HS)
- One Comprehensive High School (CAHS w/CTEC)
- One Discovery Center (Wheatley)
- One Administration Center
- One Skills Center

After the FMP is built out, optimistically five years from now, the VIDE will identify remaining sites to be shuttered and hold for future growth or turn over to DPP for other uses.

**Projections:**

The FMP takes future growth into consideration. There will be more than 2,000 more seats than we need without counting the seats in the CTEC programs, electives and laboratory spaces, and the seats at E. B. Oliver on St. Thomas, which has been added to the FMP to receive J. A. Gomez students.

**Planning Process:**

The planning process was an engaging experience and provided the VIDE an opportunity to collaborate with some of the brightest minds in education and the community. This process began with Guiding Principles developed locally. Next, the VIDE, through the ODR, retained the DLR Group, a leading planning firm in the U.S. and the world in educational facility planning. DLR Group assisted the VIDE in vetting the recommendations developed locally, engaged the community through workshops in deeper dives into the latest research in educational facility planning and sustainable design, hosted workshops and open houses to generate community feedback, as well as make presentations leading to the adoption of the FMP in June 2020. This type of engagement will continue when Campus Architectural Teams are formed to enable school communities to offer feedback to the architects on the design and to keep the community informed during construction. As we get further along in the process, the VIDE will also hire a Senior Planner, as was shown in the organizational chart, to coordinate the Campus Architectural Teams and assist in the transition into the new spaces.

**Part IV – Implementation:**

The last part of today’s presentation focuses on Implementation of the Facilities Master Plan (FMP). We will review the prioritized projects, give an update on contracts for professional services and construction, present the challenges we are facing, and share next steps.
**Prioritized Projects:**

The highest priority has been placed on building new schools to replace schools that were destroyed by hurricanes Irma and Maria, and two high schools (one in each district), that were damaged by the storms are in advanced stages of deterioration. These projects include:

**Traunch 1: Prioritized Projects**  
Arthur A. Richards PreK-8  
- Demolition at AAR in progress and Evelyn Williams contractor selected, contract pending funding)

Charlotte Amalie HS  
- Wheatley 9th Grade Center Modernization in progress  
- Abraham Modernization for Skills Center in progress  
- Demolition of CAHS, (contractor selected, contract pending funding)

Sprauve PreK-12  
- Bridging Documents/Schematic Design and Estimates in progress

Boschulte PreK-8  
- Bridging Documents/Schematic Design and Estimates in progress

Central HS  
- Bridging Documents/Schematic Design and Estimates in progress

**Traunch 2: Upon Approval of FEMA PWs**  
- New Builds (Arthur A. Richards PreK-8, Central HS, Charlotte Amalie HS Academic Buildings, Sprauve PreK-12, Curriculum Center - STT)  
- Modernizations (Andrews PreK-8, Gardine PreK-8, Markoe PreK-8, Complex HS & CTEC, Administration Center at Muckle, Cancryn-Lockhart PreK-8, Bowsky PreK-8, Kean HS)  
- Urgent Repairs (remaining campuses as needed)

**Traunch 3: Deferred Until After Traunches 1 and 2 are Funded**  
- New Builds (Muller PreK-8)  
- Modernizations (Larsen PreK-8, Woodson Discovery Center, Wheatley Discovery Center, Muller PreK-8, Sibilly PreK-3, Tuitt PreK-3, E. Benjamin Oliver)  
- Minimal Repairs at shuttered campuses as needed

**Status Update:**

Project Highlights  
- Arthur Richards Demo: In Progress  
- Wheatley Modernization: In Progress  
- Abraham Modernization: Contract Just Signed
**Next Steps**

The community, users and staff will be engaged in training sessions and workshops on getting the most out of the new, flexible learning spaces. Also, the Advisory Board next meetings will include workshops to further define CTE offerings and adult education. The VIDE looks forward to engaging in discussion with UVI Cell and the CTE Board. The overall program can take 5-8 years; at least 5 years to get the major projects done, with 3 years for construction of a school. Construction start times will be staggered as it takes for design and all associated PW’s will not be obligated at the same time.

- Campus architectural teams will be formed
- Operations Training will be provided by the contractors that build the schools, and the architects and engineers that design them as part of the design process and part of the commissioning process.
- User Training begins now

Please allow us to share with you some photographs of our early work in progress.

Through the New Schools Construction Advisory Board, VIDE leaders will engage with the FMP firm and VIDE Operations to plan for the future operation of the new, flexible learning spaces. The Charlotte Amalie High School 9th Grade Center will be the first model of flexible learning spaces that offer a mix of modern and traditional spaces for students. To date, the Department is on schedule to open the center for the 2021-2022 school year. We look forward to providing you a tour when the facility is ready.

In closing, I would like to say that we are incredibly proud of all the work our Facilities Operations Unit has accomplished, bringing us closer to realizing new and modern public schools in the Virgin Islands. Furthermore, please be reminded that the Virgin Islands Department of Education is transforming. This transformation encompasses all areas of the Department—from our internal, day-to-day operations, to what you have heard today—the planned construction and/or modernization of USVI public schools. Transformation, however, does not happen overnight; rather, it is marked by steady, purposeful changes over a period of time. The VIDE is duty bound to complete this ambitious, but achievable feat of transforming the Virgin Islands public education system into a first-class experience for students that will prepare them for success in the world. We invite the community to be a part of this transformative work to positively impact our generations to come.

Chairwoman Sarauw and fellow committee members, we are deeply appreciative of the opportunity to share our progress with you today. We are available to answer any questions you might have. Thank you.