TESTIMONY TO THE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT OF THE 34th LEGISLATURE OF THE US VIRGIN ISLANDS

Fritz E. Lawaetz Hall
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President
Good afternoon Honorable Senator Genevieve Whitaker, Chair of the Committee on Education and Workforce Development, committee members, all other senators present, listening and viewing audience. I am Carol A Callwood, president of St. Thomas-St. John Federation of Teachers, Local 1825. Thank you for inviting our Union to share with you our position on the reopening of schools during this COVID-19 period as well as our position as the union that represents the educational professionals, paraprofessionals and school related personnel (Support Staff) of the Virgin Islands Department of Education.

In previous testimonies before the 32nd and 33rd Legislatures, I shared our experiences regarding the development of the school calendar, school safety and educational effectiveness, the morale of teachers and the students. I was challenged because of terminology I used when describing how our membership felt post Hurricanes Irma and Maria. Unfortunately, much of what was written in 2018 and 2019 still stands today. Some of our facilities (schools and activity center) are still in a state of unreadiness to receive staff and students safely. When the school buildings were closed last year due to the pandemic, we were under the assumption that the down time would have been the perfect opportunity for VIDE to rectify the structural deficiencies that have plagued this department for so many years. As the new school year began and the work had not, I inquired only to be told that the reason is the same as in previous years, “There is no funding”. So, that brings us to almost 12 months later and the plan to resume in-person instruction in the classrooms that have not been repaired. I have been assured that these rooms will be fixed before the students return but I do not have faith in that statement. History has demonstrated that those assurances are not reliable.

Some classrooms have roof damage, ACs need to be repaired or replaced in rooms with poor ventilation especially now as CDC states that proper ventilation is a must. There is a continued presence of “irritants” in many of the rooms (I was reprimanded for using the word mold to identify the substance in the air and visibly growing on some of the walls.) The cost and time needed to properly clean and repair the schools and activity centers before classes resume has not been identified or at least have not been shared with us. CDC mandates proper ventilation and air quality controls. We do not know the status of our campuses and the air quality of the classrooms.

As I have stated from the hurricane recovery period, preparation is a must to move forward into what was termed then as our “New Normal”. Normal is defined as the usual, average or typical state or condition. After the passage of IrMaria, there is nothing usual about the way things can be done in and around classroom instruction. The term New Normal is defined as the current state of being after some dramatic change has transpired. IrMaria brought that change and COVID-19 has created another dramatic change in the way things were being done. In my 2018 testimony I stated:

...Those storms changed the landscape, physically and metaphorically. Our new normal brings challenges but also opportunity. Our New Normal includes limited internet access in a technology dependent system. Attendance, grades, lesson planning and the teacher evaluation system require access to the internet to complete the tasks and on an almost daily basis, internet connectivity is lost. Even with these limitations, administrators are pressuring the teachers to comply with timelines and deadlines because their evaluations are tied to completion of these tasks by their teachers. What is apparent is that our new normal will include fewer teachers in our territory. We are struggling with mandated initiatives without adequate training and with less than adequate resources. But we are doing what we love to do, so we adjust to our new normal. But the New Normal does not have to reflect only the negative. Our new normal allows us to think outside of the box, to be more creative in our approach to teaching, to share with our students the ability to turn a challenging situation into a positive.

That statement could have easily have been written today. We have forged ahead into this new space. We have acquired some of the technology that can connect our students to the rest of the world. There are so many opportunities for us to continue to showcase the exceptional students that this territory produces. We only need to capitalize on them.
There are so many issues surrounding the safe opening of our schools that in the 5 minutes allotted to me I may not have enough time to discuss the positive experiences. Presently School Food Authority employees, monitors and our bus drivers have been out distributing food since March without adequate staffing, equipment shortage and NO protection from the elements. At the beginning of the program, I solicited and purchased masks and hand sanitizers for these employees because the VIDE said that masks were not required based on the statements of CDC at the time. Needless to say, shortly after CDC recommended masks to be worn. To this day, almost a year after the program began, most of the sites on St. Thomas are distributing out in the open without a tent for coverage. These employees reported to work at the onset of the pandemic as did the other frontline ‘essential’ workers but were never compensated as such. While everyone else were in the safety of their homes during the governor’s Stay at Home order, these employees were cooking, packing and distributing food through our territory. While other departments honored the CBA of their employees by providing the hazardous pay incentive, we continue to fight with the VIDE to provide the pay for these employees.

But despite the challenges, education is a desired profession for us and we do whatever is necessary to provide a quality education for our students, even if it means sacrificing our time, resources and sometimes peace of mind. I once read a quote that said, “One mark of a great educator is the ability to lead students out to a place where even the educator has never been.” This is so appropriate now, the educators in this territory are in front of our students (virtually) leading them into a future that is as unclear as the origin of this pandemic. We are only certain that it exists and we will make the most of our present situation to prepare them for their future.

Our national president, Ms. Randi Weingarten has written in the AFT Framework for Reopening Schools, published last April that schools are essential public goods that prepare students to be informed and productive citizens, as well as provide critical nutrition, counseling and social services, especially for disadvantaged students. As important as in-person instruction is, safety comes first. The framework is based on science and public health protocols as well as educator, school staff and healthcare expertise—not on politics or wishful thinking.

One thing that is undeniably clear and demonstrated through the nation, successful school reopening plans include the representatives of the employees (unions). The employees of the VIDE generally receive their information after the decisions have been made and often those decisions have to be modified because implementation is hampered due to logistics that would have been identified if discussed. We look forward to the discussion today as we are anxiously awaiting to hear the procedures and protocols that will be in place for the safety of the adults and students that enter the campuses. We know the best way for students to connect, learn and thrive is in person, in school. But the return to school must be done safely.

Although I have shared so many challenges that we are experiencing, many of our students have been able to demonstrate growth and produce in the various disciplines. Yes, we have the digital divide but I have faith that we will be able to overcome the obstacles that have prohibited all students from success. I must commend the VIDE for the things that they were able to accomplish but I would be remised if I didn’t say that the transition would have been smoother and quicker if the employees had been a part of the preparation. As I have always said, communication is the most important aspect for successful implementation of any plan. I look forward to collaboratively working to provide the resources that will take us on the path to success.

Thank you for this opportunity and I am available to answer any questions.