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Testimony of Rosa Soto-Thomas, President, St. Croix Federation of Teachers, Local 1826

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Good morning Senator Genevieve Whitaker, Chairperson of the Committee on Education and Workforce Development, other members of the Legislature of the Virgin Islands, fellow testifiers and the viewing and listening audience.

My name is Rosa Soto-Thomas. I am President of the St. Croix Federation of Teachers, AFT Local 1826, a labor union representing educational professionals, paraprofessionals and support staff. The union’s role and responsibilities are fully outlined in Act 4440 of the Virgin Islands Codes. We serve approximately 5,100 students in the St. Croix School District.

At this time, I would like to take a moment to recognize, acknowledge and salute all the AFT members for their commitment and diligence to the education and supports of students of the Virgin Islands Public School System during this unprecedented pandemic Covid-19. Rest assured that your efforts have not gone unnoticed. One Love!

I would like to thank Chairwoman Genevieve Whitaker for this opportunity to testify before the Education and Workforce Development Committee of the Legislature of the Virgin Islands. Our first meeting went well and I am looking
forward to our continued partnership. There is indeed a lot at stake as it pertains to the education of the children of the Virgin Islands.

Although the union and the VIDE continue to meet and forge relationships, there are instances when pertinent information is not communicated directly to our members and the union but is released via social media and other mediums causing chaos and mistrust. The timely release of information to the union, the untimely processing of grievances by the VIDE and the inconsistencies with contract enforcement is also an issue.

**AFT’s Take on the Reopening of VI Public Schools:**

While it is a no brainer that remote learning cannot replace the traditional classroom or in-person learning, members are very concerned about the preparation, readiness and implementation of covid-19 protocols. Also concerning is the transparency regarding the identification of positive cases, contact tracing and quarantining. As I reflect on the last positive case at VIDE Headquarters, while the affected member did what was expected subsequent to their positive identification, a person who was suspected of being exposed was sent home only to return to work four days after outside of what is recommended by CDC guidelines. Immediately following this incident, the building was not cleaned or sanitized. Not even a door knob in VIDE Headquarters was wiped down and members were told to return to work the following day. This fans the flame of further mistrust and resentment on behalf of AFT members and rightfully so. This will be refuted but it is what it is.

**Other Concerning Issues Regarding the Return to In-person Learning:**

- Clearance for school buildings from the Department of Health, Fire Services, OSHA and EPA have not been received by members or the union
- A Covid-19 Response Plan for each site has not been received
- Teachers want to go back; they want to be safe. Why is that so hard to understand and respect?
✓ No clear mask rules have been adopted by the department (e.g., gaiters, bandanas, and one-layer masks should not be permitted)
✓ Proper ventilation/mold remediation
✓ Broken AC Units
✓ Heat and the wearing of masks absolutely do not mesh
✓ Classroom have not been sanitized by professionals; Custodians Schedules need to be made available to AFT members
✓ Hybrid Instructional Models are confusing
✓ Teacher shortage & retention
✓ Lack of adequate custodians at sites
✓ Operable hand sanitizers and paper towels dispensers
✓ Members have expressed fear of having unmasked students in their classroom during lunch and the timely subsequent cleaning after lunch has ended. Who will be responsible for immediate cleaning?
✓ Will childcare assistance be available through Human Services
✓ Educators do not trust the VIDE team to make decisions about their lives.
✓ Members recently received VIDE’s travel policy which is troubling and illegal. The union will be demanding to negotiate items included in this policy through OCB
✓ One size does not fit all, members have different situations. (preexisting conditions, multiple children and the like)
✓ Timely release of information regarding work details
✓ Burn out!

**Vaccines:**
The union continues to educate and encourage members to take the Covid-19 vaccines that are available. According to FDA regulations, vaccines cannot be mandated during an Emergency Use Authorization (EUA). As we all know, there are subgroups of people who are not recommended to take the vaccine. Nevertheless, we are hoping that more members who meet the criteria sign-up to take the vaccines. Our move towards herd immunity is imperative.
**Status of AFT Negotiations:**

The union and its membership are looking forward to getting back to the bargaining table. Our Collective Bargaining Agreement between the Government of the Virgin Islands, Department of Education and the St. Thomas/ St. John Federation of Teachers Local 1825 and the St. Croix Federation of Teachers Local 1826 expired on August 31, 2020. Consequently, we continue to extend our contract and recently signed our 6th contract extension with the GVI. The AFT has received tentative dates of March 22-26 and April 12-17 to reconvene negotiations for a successor agreement. Our members responsibilities and roles have increased substantially during this unprecedented pandemic and their pay increases need to be addressed post haste.

**Reimbursement of the 8% case:**

The AFT members, along with Steele workers and many in our community have been anxiously awaiting the restoration of the 8% salary reduction which was egregiously imposed by the 29th Legislature. Although attempts were made by Governor Mapp to restore the 8%, this was not well received, and the sin-tax apparently fell to the wayside.

Many in our community to include the AFT were happy to hear that the current administration may soon be in a position to make affected members whole once the case with Reefco and the GVI is resolved through the District Court and Excise Tax collections resume. It is long over-due. Members have express that they are optimistic that a favorable outcome will be garnered by this august body.

Here ends my testimony. Once again, I thank you for the invitation to put the concerns of AFT members on the record in hope that each will be addressed. I stand ready to answer any questions this body may have.

Thank you!