



THE VIRGIN ISLANDS DEPARTMENT OF
EDUCATION

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**The Virgin Islands Department of Education Responds to AFT Job Action,
Prioritizing Students and Collaboration - Plans to Conduct School
on September 21st in the St. Croix District**

The Virgin Islands Department of Education (VIDE) is actively addressing the recent teacher job action in the District of St. Croix, aiming to minimize disruptions to students' education while fostering open and constructive dialogue with the leadership of the American Federation of Teachers Local 1826 (AFT). Following a meeting held today with the AFT, VIDE officials left with a plan to move forward in conducting school in the St. Croix District on Thursday, September 21, 2023, with the assistance of the AFT.

Earlier today, VIDE officials were alerted to a situation where numerous schools in the district lacked teachers, either due to teachers calling in sick or indicating that they would be late. An assessment was carried out, revealing an insufficient number of staff available for instruction. Consequently, all PreK-6 and PreK-8 Schools, in addition to the John H. Woodson Junior High School had to be closed due to the shortage of teachers, adversely affecting the schools' ability to deliver instruction.

The Virgin Islands Department of Education acknowledges the concerns raised by our valued teachers and remains committed to addressing them in a spirit of collaboration and understanding. We recognize that educators play a vital role in shaping the future of our children and our community, and their voices are of utmost importance.

VIDE Senior Officials for the District of St. Croix met with AFT President, Rosa Soto-Thomas today to engage in constructive dialogue on key concerns. The VIDE was transparent in providing updates regarding measures that have already been implemented to address the legitimate concerns of the AFT membership. Specific concerns discussed with the AFT President included, but were not limited to:

Air Conditioning Units and Electrical Upgrades

Commissioner Wells-Hedrington emphasized the importance of upgrading electrical systems in the schools. Lessons learned from the Juanita Gardine School site highlighted the need for proper infrastructure to support air conditioning units. The Juanita Gardine School site's electrical upgrade

work, initiated in August, will conclude by the end of September, ensuring optimal air conditioning operation. The VIDE has identified funding in ARPA that can be reprogrammed to allow for some of the infrastructure needs to be addressed pending approval from the U.S. Department of Education.

Replacement AC Units and Parts

The Department has procured replacement units and parts through CARES II funding, which will be installed upon arrival by the Operations Division to improve the functionality of our schools.

Impact of Heatwave on School Schedules

During the meeting, the VIDE addressed the impact of the recent heatwave on school operations. Due to extensive damage and loss of devices, which has resulted in over \$3 million worth of assets, schools territory-wide are unable to revert to virtual learning as a means of addressing the heat in classrooms. The VIDE seeks the full cooperation of parents and students in promptly returning laptops and MiFi devices to the respective school of the student or the main office headquarters. As previously announced, the most affected schools will begin adjusted schedules on Monday, September 25, 2023.

Teacher Training and Certification

Approximately 80% of teachers are either uncertified or due for recertification. VIDE remains committed to providing professional development hours and seeks union collaboration to support teachers in the recertification process, with a focus on specialized subgroups such as Special Education.

The VIDE is steadfast in ensuring a safe, conducive, and enriching learning environment for all students and appreciates the collaboration with the union in addressing these critical issues. A focal matter of importance for the VIDE is to ensure that there is minimal instructional disruption and learning loss. Educational continuity is the primary goal to reduce the need for extensive make up days. We appreciate the support of our community, parents, and students during this time and are committed to maintaining transparency and communication about the ongoing situation.

The Virgin Islands Department of Education recognizes that our teachers are the heart of our education system, and their dedication to our students is unwavering. We are confident that, through collaboration and a shared commitment to the well-being of our students, we can find common ground and resolve the issues at hand.

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