

COMMITTEE ON BUDGET, APPROPRIATIONS, AND FINANCE

VIRGIN ISLANDS
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

SENATE HEARING
TESTIMONY

Prepared By:
Dionne Wells-Hedrington, Ed. D
Commissioner

April 21, 2026



Dionne Wells-Hedrington, Ed.D.
Commissioner

GOVERNMENT OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS
DEPARTMENT OF
EDUCATION



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April 19, 2026

Honorable Novelle E. Francis Jr., Chairman
Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance
Capitol Building
Post Office Box 1690
St. Thomas, Virgin Islands 00804

Sent electronically via ccarty-brown@legvi.org

Dear Senator Francis:

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Committee on Budget, Appropriations and Finance on behalf of the Virgin Islands Department of Education (VIDE). We appreciate the Committee's consideration of Bill No. 36-0257, which proposes the transfer of a portion of Parcel No. 2C Estate Ross for use by Charlotte Amalie High School.

As highlighted in the testimony, this transfer is essential to advancing the timely and cost-effective reconstruction of the school. The parcel will serve as a necessary laydown area, helping to reduce project delays, avoid ongoing leasing costs, and support safer, more efficient site access.

Given the constraints of the capped FEMA funding and rising construction costs, timely action is critical. We respectfully request your favorable consideration and continued support of this measure.

Thank you for your commitment to the students and families of the Virgin Islands. Please feel free to reach out should you need any additional information.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Dionne Wells-Hedrington".

Dionne Wells-Hedrington, Ed.D.
Commissioner

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Introduction

Commissioner’s Statement

Good afternoon, Chairman Novelle Francis Jr., Vice-chair, Marvin A. Blyden; other member of the committee, Senator Kurt A. Violet, Senator Dwayne M. DeGraff, Senator Ray Fonseca, Senator Hubert L. Frederick and Senator Marise C. James, other members of the 36th Legislature, listening and viewing audience. My name is Dr. Dionne Wells Hedrington, Commissioner for the Virgin Islands Department of Education. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on Bill No. 36-0257.an act transferring the eastern portion of Parcel No.2C Estate Ross, 8 New Quarter, St. Thomas from the Virgin Islands Housing Finance Authority to the Virgin Islands Department of Education for use by Charlotte Amalie High School.

With me this afternoon, is Ms. Chaneel Callwood, Architect for the Virgin Islands Department of Education, VIDE, and others are on standby should additional clarity be needed. We thank this body for your continued commitment to the department and to the children of the Virgin Islands.

The Virgin Islands Department of Education provides instruction to approximately 10,297 students enrolled in public schools across the Territory as of January 2026. This number changes daily due to open enrollment and student withdrawals. These students have access to technology devices via Chromebooks, laptops, tablets, and Promethean and Smart Boards

The Legislature has been with VIDE on the journey to rebuild our schools since 2019, when our New School Construction Advisory Board submitted the first draft of the Industry Standards and began working on the facility master plan all the way through attaining the FEMA award of \$3.5 billion for new school construction and modernization. We are changing the footprint of public education as we know it by improving our learning spaces for our faculty, staff and students.

The Virgin Islands Department of Education officials met with Executive Director, Eugene Jones and his staff at the Virgin Islands Housing Finance Authority, VIHFA, over a year ago to ask for easement to utilize the said property for the demolition of Building A, B, C at Charlotte Amalie High School. At that meeting it was determined that VIHFA would not allow the VIDE to use the property without a cost. Which seemed very insincere on the part of the Authority, being that we have an agreement in place where they utilize our property for free. Nonetheless, the VIDE was placed in a predicament that left us without any choice but to engage in a lease agreement. After back-and-forth negotiations, we entered into the lease agreement in the amount of \$25,000 per year, however with negotiations the new monthly rent will be \$6,534.00; for an annual amount of \$78,408.00 for year two.

Unlike all of the other high schools in the territory, CAHS is landlocked. The project needs VIHFA land to the west of CAHS, the location of the former Jefferson Annex School, as a laydown. Transfer of the land to VIDE would allow VIDE to avoid the cost of leasing the land and leave more funds available for the project. After the new school has been built, the land will be used for additional parking to provide an additional means of egress from the site through the signalized intersection on Alton A. Adams, Sr., Drive.

As an alternative, the Department attempted to acquire the Cinema 1 (C1) property on the east side of CAHS, however, the lease that VIDE had on the property ended without acquisition. Therefore, the VIHFA parcel is our only remaining option to obtain a laydown area.

Collectively, we have embarked on an unprecedented campaign to rebuild the territory's public-school campuses to Industry Standards of quality, on time, and within budget. The FEMA grant is a capped grant. This means that although inflation occurs, the \$3.5 billion will not be increased. This means that the longer we wait to build, the more it costs. Stated another way, the longer we take to build, the less we will be able to build. Time is of the essence.

Senators of the 36th Legislature, your transfer of Parcel 2C Estate Ross from the VIHFA to the VIDE would allow construction of the school to begin now; support more efficient construction of the school; and, most importantly, provide breathing room for CAHS and enable the future development of an alternative western entry from a signalized intersection to increase safety.

Conclusion

In closing, the Virgin Islands Department of Education respectfully urges the favorable consideration and timely approval of Bill No. 36-0257. The transfer of Parcel No. 2C Estate Ross is not merely a matter of land use, it is a critical step toward advancing the reconstruction of Charlotte Amalie High School, ensuring that our students and educators have access to safe, modern, and fully functional learning environments. With limited resources under a capped FEMA grant and rising construction costs, time is a decisive factor. Your support will eliminate unnecessary expenditures, accelerate project timelines, and enhance safety and accessibility for the school community.

We thank you for your continued partnership and unwavering commitment to the children of the Virgin Islands, and we stand ready to move forward with urgency upon your approval. Team VIDE remains available to answer any questions or concerns you may have.