

REFORMING, REBUILDING, AND REBRANDING PUBLIC EDUCATION

VIRGIN ISLANDS DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
35TH LEGISLATIVE COMMITTEE ON BUDGET,
APPROPRIATION, AND FINANCE

PRESENTED ON FEBRUARY 6, 2024
DR. DIONNE WELLS-HEDRINGTON
COMMISSIONER



Dionne Wells-Hedrington, Ed.D.
Commissioner

GOVERNMENT OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS
DEPARTMENT OF
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February 6, 2024

Honorable Senator Donna Frett-Gregory
Chairwoman, Committee on Budget, Appropriation, and Finance
#20 Estate Golden Rock
Christiansted, St. Croix, Virgin Islands 00820

Sent electronically via senatorfrett-gregory@legvi.org

Dear Senator Frett-Gregory:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony **Bill No. 35-0133** - An Act amending title 17 Virgin Islands Code, chapter 15, relating to scholarships by adding section 190gg to establish an educational scholarship program to support individuals interested in pursuing a career in the maritime industry in the Virgin Islands.

This handbook provides testimony and accompanying information. Thank you for your continued support and attention regarding the needs of the Virgin Islands Department of Education.

Sincerely,

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

Dionne Wells-Hedrington, Ed. D
Commissioner

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Introduction

Good-day and greetings to the Honorable Donna Frett-Gregory, Chairperson of the Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance; other Committee Members; other Senators present; and my fellow Virgin Islanders. I am Victor Somme III, Assistant Commissioner of Education, appearing on behalf of the Honorable Dionne Wells-Hedrington, Ed.D., Commissioner of Education. My presence today is to provide testimony on Bill No. 35-0133 - An Act amending Title 17 Virgin Islands Code, Chapter 15, relating to scholarships by adding Section 190gg to establish an educational scholarship program to support individuals interested in pursuing a career in the maritime industry in the Virgin Islands. Present with me today is:

- Renee Charleswell, Ph.D., Deputy Commissioner of Curriculum and Instruction
- Monique Faulkner, Ed.D., State Director of Career, Technical and Adult Education

This testimony speaks to the vital importance of maritime scholarships for students in the Virgin Islands Public School System. Additionally, I would like to highlight the crucial role that public schools play in preparing students for maritime careers. As our world becomes increasingly interconnected through global trade and commerce, and in the case of the Virgin Islands – cruise ship tourism, the maritime industry stands as a cornerstone, and fostering educational pathways in this field is essential for both individual success and the prosperity of the Territory.

Benefits of Maritime Scholarships

Access to Specialized Education

Maritime scholarships will provide students with the opportunity to pursue specialized education in maritime studies, navigation, marine engineering, and related fields. By alleviating the financial burden, scholarships open doors for students who may otherwise be unable to pursue their interests in the maritime industry. This ensures a diverse and skilled workforce, essential for the industry's growth and sustainability.

Promoting Diversity in the Maritime Industry

The maritime sector has historically faced challenges in achieving diversity. By offering scholarships to students from diverse backgrounds we can address the issue. A diverse workforce offers a variety of perspectives, ideas and skillsets that foster innovation and creativity. The scholarships will contribute significantly to eliminating barriers and promoting inclusivity within the maritime industry.

Meeting Industry Demand

The maritime industry is a critical component of trade as studies show that over 80% of the world's goods are transported overseas. This diverse sector is experiencing a growing demand for skilled professionals such as seafaring, shipbuilding, port operations, logistics, and marine engineering. Maritime is poised for growth over the next decade due to factors such as emerging markets in global trade, technological advancements, and infrastructure investments. By investing in maritime scholarships for public school students, we would proactively address the workforce needs of the industry in the Territory and by extension, the Caribbean. This would ensure a pipeline of well-

educated and trained individuals ready to take on the challenges and opportunities presented by the maritime sector, contributing to economic growth and competitiveness.

Preparing Students for Maritime Careers

Curricular Integration

The Virgin Islands Public School System must work to integrate maritime-related content into our curricula. This is a vital step towards incorporation of programs that can support the Governor's 2040 vision which speaks to diversification of our economic base through the production of job opportunities for residents yielding investments that support greater prosperity for all...through development and leveraging of educational resources. Coastal/Ocean Resources is one of the eight targeted sectors in Vision 2040 which were selected based on the potential to contribute to economic diversification through growth and job creation in the USVI.

The Maritime program is situated under the Transportation, Distribution and Logistics Career Cluster which lends to a diverse range of pathways for students in this industry with secondary programs such as Maritime logistics, Maritime deck operations, Maritime IT, Maritime Systems Engineering, Maritime Ship Building and Repair to name a few.

Curricular integration can include incorporating maritime history, geography, and science into existing courses to prevent duplication of core academic content and establishing specialized programs focused on maritime studies that can incorporate current CTE courses such as welding for example in a ship building and repair program, or IT in a Maritime IT Systems, or Management in Maritime Logistics.

This can be done at the secondary level at the St. Croix Career and Technical Education Center (CTEC) and Ivanna Eudora Kean High School and at the post-secondary level at the Raphael O. Wheatley Skill Center and CTEC to provide students with a deeper understanding of and experience in the industry, culminating in affiliated industry recognized credentialing.

Articulation agreements between the University of the Virgin Islands and VIDE can define a bridge to have students seamlessly matriculate into the University's Maritime offerings without certain credit duplication. Identified offerings are UVI's certificate in Aquaculture, or BA/BS in Marine Biology and Master of Marine and Environmental. This creates a roadmap for stackable credentialing for Secondary students that is seamless, affordable and an easy lift.

Industry Partnerships

Collaboration with local maritime businesses, organizations, and professionals is crucial. Public schools should actively seek partnerships to provide students with real-world experiences, such as internships, on-the-job-training for graduation credit, mentorship programs, and site visits. For example, the Department's collaboration with the Department of Labor and Gold Coast Yachts has exposed students to the development of state-of-the-art composite boatbuilding techniques and multihull ship building. Such collaborative efforts not only enhanced students' practical knowledge but also exposed them to potential career opportunities within the maritime sector.

Career Counseling and Guidance

Public schools play a pivotal role in guiding students towards suitable career paths. To prepare students for maritime careers, schools should leverage partnership with the

State Office of Career, Technical and Adult Education to invest in a comprehensive career counseling service platform and mandate engagement in training provided by the State for counselors to understand the pivotal role that CTE programs play in economic stability. This includes informing students about the diverse opportunities in the maritime industry, helping them understand the educational requirements, and facilitating connections with industry professionals.

This begins from kindergarten through elementary (K-7) with exploratory careers and then in the middle school with the creation of Career Portfolios and offering of pre-CTE courses with credits that can be transferred into their CTE pathway in High School, culminating in local, or nationally recognized beginner certification upon graduation.

Maritime scholarships for grade 12 students in the public school system are instrumental in shaping a skilled and diverse workforce for the maritime industry. By collaborating with industry partners, building CTE programs for identified in demand sectors in the local Maritime industry, integrating maritime education into curricula, and providing comprehensive career guidance, public schools can effectively prepare students for successful careers in the maritime sector. Investing in maritime education today is an investment in the future prosperity and sustainability of our communities.

Conclusion

In closing, the Virgin Islands Department of Education is pleased to provide testimony on Bill No. 35-0133. The VIDE stands in strong support of the proposed legislation, and this opportunity must be actualized now as our students must be equipped to be competitive in one of the fastest growing industries globally.

Consider this, Congress passed the Merchant Marine Act which is also known as the Jones Act in 1920. This act has stringent requirements that only Americans build the ships, man the vessels, and move the cargo between U.S. ports. The legislation was crafted with the aim of promoting both economic and national security. In December of 2014, Congress reiterated support for the Jones Act for the “strong domestic trade maritime industry, which supports the national security and economic vitality of the United States and the efficient operation of the United States system.” As an island territory, we must ensure that our students are poised to remain Nationally and globally competitive.

Thank you for the opportunity to share this information with you and our fellow Virgin Islanders. We are prepared to answer any questions you may have.