

GOVERNMENT OF THE UNITED STATES VIRGIN ISLANDS
Virgin Islands Career and Technical Education Board



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May 13th 2024

Marise C. James, Esq.
35th Legislature of the Virgin Islands
3022 Estate Golden Rock
Christiansted, USVI 00821

Subject: Testimony Committee on Education & Workforce Development

Good morning honorable Senator Marise C. James, Esq., members of the 35th Legislature of the Virgin Islands, invited testifiers and the viewing public.

As outlined in Title 17, Chapter 23, Subchapter I of the U.S. Virgin Islands Code, one of the Board's primary responsibilities is to "establish, maintain, and supervise such vocational schools (language changed to CTE), departments, or classes as may be necessary to provide adequate instruction in agriculture, trades and industries, distributive occupations, home economics and occupations essential for the national defense, for persons over 14 years of age."

However, it is important to acknowledge that while the law grants the Board this authority, the Board currently lacks the power to enforce this provision effectively. The Board recognizes the importance of establishing and overseeing CTE schools, departments, and classes that provide instruction in various fields essential for the workforce, but its ability to fully execute this responsibility is limited by the current circumstances. Despite these challenges, the Board remains committed to working within its available means to support and improve CTE programs and services in the U.S. Virgin Islands.

The Department of Education (DOE) is responsible for writing curricula, it is important to note that the Board has not yet received those documents for further scrutiny and ultimate approval. This is but just one incident whereas the Board has no power to insist on or enforce the mandated responsibilities. We recognize the significance of collaborating with local industries and employers to ensure that the curricula are industry certified, and courses of study align with the current and future needs of the job market. Once the Board receives the curricula from the DOE, we will diligently review and approve them to ensure that our CTE programs are relevant and responsive to the demands of the workforce, preparing individuals for successful careers.

In terms of recruitment and retention, our Board collaborates with the state office for CTE and adult education to promote CTE opportunities to individuals across the territory. It is important to clarify that the Board does not directly enact policy in this regard. We engage in conversations and provide guidance to raise awareness about the benefits of CTE education and the diverse career paths available. By highlighting the practical skills, hands-on experience, and employment prospects associated with CTE programs, we aim to attract a wide range of individuals, including youth, adults, and those seeking career transitions.

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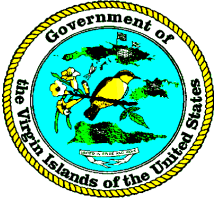


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To this end, we envision an overhaul of CTE school hours to allow students to be integrated into the workforce in the morning hours and attend academic classes in the afternoon. We also recognize that current two-year programs may have to be cut into smaller achievable segments allowing quicker assimilation into the entry-level labor market. As outlined before, if the Board cannot as be mandated by law all those recommendations unfortunately will stay just that.

To change that the law needs to be updated.

It is crucial to acknowledge that while Title 17 outlines the powers and duties of the Board, over the years, the Board has faced challenges in fully exercising its authority. This current Board is actively involved in the overall betterment of CTE in the U.S. Virgin Islands, despite being short of three members, and ample financing.

A potential source of income that could directly benefit the Board is the Career-Technical Education Training Fund. Unfortunately, Bill No. 34-0378, which would have directed a portion of this fund to the Board, did not progress beyond its initial committee hearing in November 2022.

The U.S. Virgin Islands Code endows the Board with comprehensive authority over CTE educational programs, including oversight of the Career-Technical Education Training Fund. Under Section 262, the Board is empowered to create, manage, and supervise vocational schools (CTE), departments, and classes, as well as to set their curricula and courses. This authority places the Board in a strategic position to influence the programs funded by the Fund. While Section 263 gives the Commissioner of Education presently power to distribute monies from the Fund, the Board's extensive expertise and oversight role make it an essential player in providing advice and recommendations on how the funds are allocated. The Board also ensures that the funds are utilized effectively to foster and enhance CTE educational programs. Additionally, the Board's established to secure federal funding, as outlined in Section 261, and to take necessary actions as per Section 262(7), bolster the Fund's sustainability.

The Board's active efforts to align programs with federal standards and to forge partnerships with local industries and the private sector ensure a consistent infusion of resources into the Fund. In conclusion, the Board's governance, expertise, and collaborative initiatives are crucial for shaping CTE educational programs, guiding the allocation of funds, and securing the ongoing stability and sustainability of the Career-Technical Education Training Fund. Therefore, control should be granted to the Board, or a significant portion should be earmarked for the Board as an additional budget item.

As advised by legal counsel, the Board's ability to fully execute its responsibilities is currently constrained by the lack of financial resources rather than any inherent limitations in its authority. We acknowledge that adequate funding is essential for the Board to effectively carry out its mandate and support the workforce development system. The Board remains committed to working within its existing means to contribute to the continuous improvement and advancement of CTE programs and services in the U.S. Virgin Islands, however limited. We are steadfast in maximizing the resources available to us and collaborating with stakeholders to ensure that our efforts have a positive impact on the CTE landscape and the individuals it serves. To that end Board members support CTSO events, attend CTE conferences and plan to attend a global CTE symposium during WorldSkills conference this fall.

Moving forward, the Board aims to strengthen its collaboration with various stakeholders, including educational institutions, employers, and government agencies. While we have engaged in ongoing conversations, we acknowledge that more work needs to be done to facilitate partnerships that connect CTE graduates with employment opportunities, offer career guidance, job placement assistance, and support services. By fostering strong relationships with local industries, we strive to create seamless pathways for individuals to transition from education to employment.



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Section 262(7) allows the Board "To take such other action as may be necessary or appropriate to carry out the provisions of this subchapter." This broad provision grants the Board the flexibility to take additional measures and adapt to changing circumstances to effectively implement and administer career and technical education programs. It acknowledges that the workforce development landscape may evolve over time, and the Board is empowered to respond accordingly to ensure the continued relevance and effectiveness of career and technical education.

Sam Altman, the inventor/founder, and CEO of Open AI predicted in 2021, "AI will cause the price of work that can happen in front of computer to decrease much faster than the price of work that happens in the physical world. This is the opposite of what most people (including me) expected and will have strange effects." When asked after the release of Chat GPT if he is still of the same believe he answered: "Yes, and predictable computer related jobs will decrease at an unprecedented speed!" end of quote. These predictions, if to come true are mindboggling, our local workforce will once again undergo a dramatic change.

This begs the question, is the DOE aware and are the necessary steps in place to counter this trend early on. Is the DOL researching and investing into the job markets which will inherently emerge from the creation of AI. The CTE Board sounded the alarm early on, and we hope we are heard loudly. CTE, if not given the full attention needed, will be absorbed by private industry to cover their needs, especially if the government continues to finance external entities.

In conclusion, the U.S. Virgin Islands Career and Technical Education Board is dedicated to its role in enhancing the workforce development system, despite facing considerable challenges. We remain committed to the approval and oversight of curricula, collaboration with key stakeholders, and optimally utilizing our resources to improve CTE offerings in the territory. While we currently lack robust enforcement power, our dedication to fostering a skilled, competitive workforce and supporting the economic growth of the U.S. Virgin Islands is steadfast. We respectfully urge the legislature to provide the support and resources necessary to empower us to fulfill our mandate effectively.

In closing, I would like to express my deepest gratitude for the opportunity to testify before you today. Your engagement and thoughtful consideration of the issues and potential solutions we've discussed are invaluable to our mission. I am hopeful that our collaboration will lead to significant advancements in our Career and Technical Education programs, thereby substantially benefiting our community's workforce and economic development.

Thank you, members of the legislature and all attendees, for your time and dedication to the future of education and employment in the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Ms. Jo Murphy
Chairperson VICTEB



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