

**35th Legislature of the Virgin Islands
Committee on Homeland Security, Justice and
Public Safety**

The Honorable Kenneth L. Gittens, Chairperson

**Testimony on Bill No. 35-0271, an Act amending Title 20, Virgin Islands
Code, Chapter 43, Subchapter I, by adding a section 494b establishing
school speed zones, signage and enforcement measures to promote student
and pedestrian safety near schools**

Dionne Wells-Hedrington, Ed.D.

Commissioner of Education

November 12, 2024



THE VIRGIN ISLANDS DEPARTMENT OF
EDUCATION



Good-day and greetings to the Honorable Kenneth L. Gittens, Chairman of the Committee on Homeland Security, Justice and Public Safety; Bill sponsor, Senator Angel Bolques; other Committee Members, other Senators present, and my fellow Virgin Islanders. I am Victor Somme III, Assistant Commissioner of Education, appearing before you on behalf of Dionne Wells-Hedrington, Ed.D., Commissioner of Education. My presence today is to provide testimony on Bill No. 35-0271, *“an Act amending Title 20, Virgin Islands Code, Chapter 43, Subchapter I, by adding a section 494b establishing school speed zones, signage and enforcement measures to promote student and pedestrian safety near schools.”* Present with me today are:

- Mr. Irvin R. Mason, Sr., Director of Disaster Planning and School Security;
- Mr. Ivan Williams, Sr., St. Thomas-St. John District School Security Manager;
- Mr. Jaime Roebuck, Sr., St. Croix School Security Manager
- Ms. Chantal Peter, District Supervisor of Pupil Transportation-St. Croix; and
- Mr. Causton Merchant, District Supervisor of Pupil Transportation-St. Thomas-St. John.

After internal review of the proposed legislation and consultation with our pertinent sister agencies to include the Department of Public Works (DPW) and the Virgin Islands Police Department (VIPD), the Virgin Islands Department of Education (VIDE/the Department) expresses general support for Bill No. 35-0271. The safety of our students is our first and foremost priority. Ensuring their safety allows for teaching and learning to occur.

School zones are unique environments where large numbers of young pedestrians are present during peak hours, before and after school. Children are less predictable than adults, and their ability to judge speed and distance is still developing. Lower speed limits in these areas are crucial in minimizing the risk of accidents and ensuring that drivers have ample time to react to sudden



movements by children. In the U.S. Virgin Islands, where school zones may be close to busy roads and pedestrian areas, this can be particularly crucial. The Department's research has revealed that *"In the United States, motor vehicle crashes were the leading cause of death among 13-19-year-old females and one of the leading causes of death among 13-19-year-old males in 2022"* as per the National Centers for Injury Prevention and Control, 2024. The October 22, 2022, edition of the St. Thomas Source cites that *"In the Territory, data for teen drivers (shows)...In FY 2021, there were 505 crashes involving teen drivers – 11.9% of the year's total crashes and a 28% increase from teen driver crashes recorded in FY 2020."* Speeding is one of the main factors for these crashes. In data obtained from the Virgin Islands Office of Highway Safety Annual Report FY 2019, the U.S. Virgin Islands reported a total of 4,722 crashes, out of which, 18 traffic fatalities occurred. Three (3) of those fatalities were due to speeding and an additional fatality was of a person under the age of 20.

Numerous studies have shown that lower speed limits significantly reduce the likelihood of accidents and fatalities. Combining speed limits with active enforcement and penalties creates a strong deterrent against speeding. According to research by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), reducing speed limits from 30 miles per hour (mph) to 20 mph in school zones can decrease the risk of severe injury or death by up to 60 percent. This evidence underscores the importance of implementing stricter speed regulations where they are needed most.

Lower speed limits often come with increased signage, educational campaigns and enforcement measures. Enhanced signage, clear speed regulations and enforcement can make drivers more conscious of the need to slow down in school zones. The involvement of multiple agencies such as VIDE, VIPD, and DPW, fosters a collaborative approach to school zone safety. That being said VIDE, has concerns with the following sections of the proposed legislation:



§533. Establishment of School Speed Zones, Section 2 (i & iv).

Road geometry and specifics of proximity of building to road ways is outside the purview and expertise of the VIDE. The DPW needs to be included in any such determinations and as such, this section should be amended to reflect their inclusion.

§535. Penalties, Subsection b.

The VIDE objects to this section as we are not in the practice of creating and implementing punitive measures for broken laws by adults. Initiating these actions would contribute to the VIDE deviating from its core mission of teaching and facilitating learning for the children of the Virgin Islands.

Enforcing new speed limits requires resources and commitment from local law enforcement. In areas with limited resources or where enforcement is already stretched thin, this can be a significant challenge. The allocation of fines to improve school zone infrastructure and support traffic safety education programs ensures that the legislation has a long-term impact. However, the effectiveness of the legislation and the resulting revenues are reliant on the ability to monitor and enforce compliance consistently. Often, such legislation garners strong support from local communities, including parents, teachers, and school administrators. This support can lead to more effective implementation and compliance. Public education campaigns and community involvement will help ensure that drivers, students, and parents are informed about the new regulations and their importance.



§537. Department of Education and Virgin Islands Police continuing obligations, Subsection 3(a).

One of the challenges of implementing new speed limits in school zones is the associated cost. The appropriation of \$500,000, indicated in the proposed legislation, represents a significant investment. For the VIDE, which has severe budgetary constraints, these costs would be a major obstacle. In addition, the aforementioned appropriation is geared only to the DPW for signage and public education campaigns. If the VIDE is to assist DPW in this venture, additional funding will be necessary as the public education campaigns would need to be on-going. Radio announcements alone can cost up to \$8,000 each. **The VIDE would respectfully suggest §537 Subsection 3 be amended to include \$100,000 annual funding for the requested on-going educational campaigns.**

In closing, VIDE proffers that while Bill No. 35-0271 “The “School Speed Zone and Enforcement Act” represents a proactive step towards enhancing traffic safety in school zones across the U.S. Virgin Islands and has the potential to significantly enhance student safety and improve traffic management around schools there are also challenges related to implementation costs, enforcement, and possible impacts on traffic flow. Addressing potential challenges through effective and continuous collaboration with GVI departments and ensuring a balanced approach that includes public education, effective enforcement strategies, annual budget appropriations and periodic reviews will be crucial to the successful implementation of this legislation.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this proposed legislation, and for your time and consideration. We stand prepared to answer any questions.