

REFORMING, REBUILDING, AND REBRANDING PUBLIC EDUCATION

VIRGIN ISLANDS DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION TELECOMMUNICATIONS TESTIMONY BEFORE THE 35TH LEGISLATIVE COMMITTEE ON HOUSING, TRANSPORTATION & TELECOMMUNICATIONS

PRESENTED ON JANUARY 24, 2024
DR. DIONNE WELLS-HEDRINGTON, COMMISSIONER





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January 24, 2024

Honorable Senator Marvin Blyden
Chairman of the Housing, Transportation and
Telecommunication Committee
Capitol Building
PO Box 1690
St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands 00804

Sent electronically via senatorblyden@legvi.org

Dear Honorable Senator Marvin Blyden,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony about VIDE's present infrastructure and telecommunications to the 35th Legislature Senate Committee on Housing, Transportation & Telecommunications.

This handbook provides testimony and accompanying information. Thank you for your continued support and attention regarding the progress and plans to rebuild a stronger VIDE.

Sincerely,

Dionne Wells-Hedrington, Ed.D.
Commissioner

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STATEMENT BY COMMISSIONER

Good morning, Housing, Transportation, and Telecommunications Chair, Senator Marvin Blyden; Vice-Chair, Marise C. James; committee members Carla J. Joseph, Angel Bolques, Jr., Samuel Carrion, Dwayne DeGraff, and Ray Fonseca; non-committee members present, and everyone listening and viewing today. I am Dr. Dionne Wells-Hedrington, and I am here to present an overview of the major projects initiated by the Virgin Islands Department of Education for enhancing the telecommunications infrastructure in our schools.

With me this morning is Victor Somme III, Assistant Commissioner. Additionally, Rodney Hendrickson, our Director of Management Information Systems, will be participating virtually. His expertise and insights have been invaluable in the integration of advanced information systems within our educational framework.

IMPORTANCE OF TELECOMMUNICATIONS IN SCHOOLS

Telecommunications in schools play a pivotal role in enhancing the educational experience. They bridge the gap between local and global education, allowing students to connect with global trends and access various digital resources. This technology facilitates immediate communication for updates and parental engagement and ensures educational continuity during unforeseen circumstances, offering flexible learning environments that cater to different styles and needs. The ability to collaborate with peers and experts globally broadens students' perspectives and deepens their learning experience.

Regarding safety and security, telecommunications enable swift emergency communications and efficient monitoring of school premises. They simplify administrative tasks, from managing student records to optimizing resources, increasing efficiency, and reducing costs. Importantly, exposure to these technologies fosters digital literacy, equipping students with essential skills for a technology-driven job market and encouraging creative and critical engagement with technology.

Moreover, telecommunications ensure inclusive access to quality internet resources for all students, including those with special needs. They facilitate innovative teaching methods like virtual reality and personalized learning experiences. For educators, it offers opportunities for professional development and global exchange of best practices. In essence, telecommunications in education enhances learning and prepares students for a future in an increasingly interconnected and digital world.

PRESENT INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS AND PLANS

Projects Overview

Surveillance Cameras: The installation of surveillance cameras across all school campuses is a significant step towards ensuring the safety and security of our students and staff. These cameras will help monitor activities, prevent incidents, and provide peace

of mind to parents and the community. ARPA funding was used to procure services to install cameras at all our sites. In the St. Thomas-St. John district, that contract is executed with SmartNet, and the one for St. Croix is at the Department of Property and Procurement for execution of the contract.

Campus Security: The Department has identified funding to procure a “Crisis Alert Badge System,” an identification badge mechanism for all employees wherein when security or criminal issues arise, employees will be able to depress a microchip embedded button on the badge to alert school security, police officers, and school administration. This system will alert school and police authorities to the location of an incident, save on reaction and response time, and minimize unnecessary attention to severe maladaptive behavioral issues by students and others.

Intercom Systems: The introduction of modern intercom systems in schools aims to improve communication. These systems will facilitate swift communication in emergencies and streamline daily announcements. The Public Finance Authority funding was used to procure services from Omni Systems for installing intercoms at Joseph Gomez Elementary School and Charlotte Amalie High School. In the St. Croix district, Juanita Gardine, Central High School and Complex/CTEC are with the third party for a purchase order. All other intercom installations and upgrades will be done internally by the VIDE team.

Internet Bandwidth Upgrade: Recognizing the critical role of the Internet in contemporary education, we have significantly increased the bandwidth of our Internet services. This upgrade ensures that our students and staff can seamlessly access online resources, participate in digital learning, and engage in collaborative projects without hindrance.

COORDINATION AND IMPLEMENTATION

I am pleased to report that the coordination between telecommunications providers and the Virgin Islands Department of Education has been exemplary, with no significant issues or challenges. This collaboration has been instrumental in the smooth planning and implementation of these projects.

The Department has engaged Viya as our primary Internet Service Provider. This switch occurred in summer 2023. Additionally, VIYA, our telecommunications provider in the territory, is actively working to implement backup solutions. This development is aimed at ensuring uninterrupted internet service, even when the primary link is down. The implementation of such backup systems by VIYA will significantly bolster the reliability and continuity of internet services, further supporting the educational needs of students.

AFFORDABLE CONNECTIVITY PROGRAM

In the Virgin Islands, the Department of Education has yet to engage with the Affordable Connectivity Program, but significant strides are being made to enhance internet access for students through other means. A key player in this effort is the Virgin Islands Next Generation Network (VINGN), which facilitates online access for students in specific areas

of the territory. This initiative is crucial for providing digital resources necessary for modern education.

Together, these efforts by VINGN and VIYA highlight a strong commitment to overcoming connectivity challenges and improving the digital infrastructure in the Virgin Islands. This approach underscores the importance of local solutions and robust infrastructure in ensuring consistent and quality internet access for educational purposes, crucial in a digitally connected world.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, these projects represent a significant leap forward in our commitment to providing a safe, secure, and technologically advanced learning environment. We believe that these steps will not only enhance the educational experience of our students but also prepare them for a future in an increasingly digital world. While VIDE still has some challenges that need to be addressed, we are committed to ensuring that all schools have reliable connectivity.

Thank you for the opportunity to address this body, we stand ready to answer any questions you may have.