

Committee on Culture, Youth, Aging, Sports, and Parks

**VIRGIN ISLANDS DEPARTMENT OF
EDUCATION**

SENATE HEARING TESTIMONY

Prepared By:

**Dionne Wells-Hedrington, Ed. D
Commissioner**

October 31, 2025



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Commissioner

GOVERNMENT OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS
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October 31, 2025

Honorable Angel L. Bolques, Chairperson
Committee on Culture, Youth, Aging, Sports and Parks
Capitol Building
P.O. Box 1690
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Sent electronically via abolques@legvi.org

Dear Senator Bolques:

Thank you for the opportunity to present before the Committee on Culture, Youth, Aging, Sports and Parks testimony on addressing youth violence as public health emergency and evaluated systems currently in place to support students' emotional, psychological, and behavioral well-being. In my testimony, you will find the matters most relevant to the Department of Education's role in:

- Behavioral health resources and intervention services are currently offered in schools throughout the territory;
- School-based mental health staff capacity (counselors, psychologists, social workers) and any service gaps;
- Programs aimed at early intervention, emotional regulation, and trauma recovery for students;
- The Department's partnerships with external agencies and organizations to deliver mental health or crisis support;
- Challenges faced in meeting students' mental health needs and your recommendations for improving systemic support and sustainability.

Enclosed with this letter is our comprehensive handbook, which includes detailed testimony and supporting documentation. I sincerely appreciate your continued support and commitment to addressing the needs of the Virgin Islands Department of Education.

Sincerely,

Dionne Wells-Hedrington, Ed.D.
Commissioner

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Introduction

Commissioner’s Statement

Good morning, Chairperson Angel L. Bolques, all committee members that are present, and all who are listening and viewing today. I am Victor Somme III, privileged to serve as the Assistant Commissioner of Education for the Virgin Islands. I appreciate the opportunity to present testimony on addressing youth violence as a public health emergency. The Department recognizes that schools are the front line in supporting students’ mental, emotional, and behavioral well-being. We are committed to building systems that not only respond to crises but cultivate safe, supportive environments that prevent them.

Joining me today are members of my team:

- Dr. Renee Charleswell, Deputy Commissioner of Curriculum and Instruction
- Dr. Symra D. Brown-Gumbs, Deputy Superintendent, St. Thomas-St. John District
- Dr. Carla Bastian-Knight, Insular Superintendent, St. Croix District

Additional VIDE personnel are on standby to provide detailed insights into specific areas if needed. Again, thank you for your unwavering support and the opportunity to testify today.

Behavioral Health Resources and Intervention Services in Schools

Behavioral health resources and intervention services are currently offered in schools across the St. Thomas–St. John and St. Croix districts. Each school has access to guidance counselors, student assistance programs, and school psychologists who provide direct support, crisis intervention, and referrals to outside services when necessary.

The Department has also integrated Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) frameworks to promote early identification and tiered intervention. These systems allow schools to monitor student behavior, attendance, and engagement data to detect early warning signs and provide targeted support before issues escalate into violence or chronic absenteeism.

Additionally, trauma-informed care practices are increasingly embedded into school culture through training, staff development, and leadership initiatives. These efforts reflect VIDE's recognition that violence and disruptive behavior are often symptoms of unaddressed trauma, not simply discipline issues.

School-Based Mental Health Staff Capacity and Service Gaps

VIDE employs school counselors, psychologists, and social workers who are vital to the behavioral health support network. However, despite their dedication, the current staffing levels fall significantly below recommended national ratios. For example, the American School Counselor Association recommends one counselor for every 250 students. In many Virgin Islands schools, the ratio is closer to one counselor for every 500 to 600 students.

This imbalance limits our ability to provide consistent one-on-one counseling, conduct proactive wellness checks, and follow up on at-risk students. Furthermore, the territory faces challenges recruiting and retaining licensed mental health professionals, particularly for the St. Croix district and our K–8 schools where trauma and poverty-related stressors are more pronounced.

Our budget request prioritizes expanding behavioral health staff, establishing School Wellness Centers in each district, and increasing access to partnerships/telehealth mental health services to bridge staffing gaps and reach students in remote or resource-limited areas.

Early Intervention, Emotional Regulation, and Trauma Recovery Programs

The Department has implemented several initiatives to strengthen early intervention and promote emotional well-being. Through the Stronger Connections Grant, schools have introduced social-emotional learning (SEL) lessons, conflict-resolution programs, and peer mentorship opportunities that help students recognize and manage emotions, build empathy, and form healthy relationships.

Elementary students engage in SEL lessons embedded within daily instruction, while middle and high school students benefit from small-group counseling focused on resilience, anger management, and coping strategies. Schools have also begun implementing restorative practices,

shifting from punitive discipline toward restorative dialogue and accountability, which reduces suspensions and fosters connection.

In addition, trauma-recovery programming, including grief counseling and post-crisis debriefing, is available following critical incidents that affect students or school communities. These services ensure that recovery is guided by empathy, professional support, and stability.

Partnerships with External Agencies and Organizations

VIDE recognizes that addressing youth violence and mental health challenges requires a community-wide response. The Department works closely with the Virgin Islands Department of Health, Department of Human Services, and Law Enforcement to coordinate services, crisis responses, and follow-up care for students and families.

We also partner with nonprofit organizations, faith-based institutions, and behavioral health providers to expand access to counseling, therapeutic services, and parent education programs. These collaborations have allowed schools to host community wellness fairs, parent workshops on emotional regulation, and mental health awareness campaigns.

Moving forward, the Department seeks to formalize these partnerships through Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) that ensure consistent, coordinated care and efficient data sharing among agencies while maintaining student confidentiality.

Challenges and Recommendations for Systemic Support and Sustainability

Despite progress, significant challenges remain in meeting the behavioral health needs of our students. Among the most pressing are:

- Staffing shortages and high turnover among mental health professionals.
- Limited dedicated spaces in schools for confidential counseling or therapy sessions.
- Insufficient funding for sustained programming once grants cycles end; and
- The stigma that still surrounds mental health within some families and communities.

To overcome these barriers, VIDE recommends:

1. Establishing a permanent line item in the Department's budget dedicated to behavioral health staffing and programming.
2. Developing school-based wellness hubs in each district to centralize counseling, crisis response, and parent outreach.
3. Expanding trauma-informed professional development for all staff, ensuring every adult in a school understands how to recognize and respond to emotional distress; and
4. Building stronger data systems to monitor student wellness indicators and evaluate the impact of interventions over time.

These measures will ensure sustainability, reduce dependency on short-term grants, and strengthen the schools' role as a stabilizing force in our communities.

Conclusion

Youth violence is not inevitable, it is preventable when we approach it as a public health issue rooted in unmet emotional and behavioral needs. The Virgin Islands Department of Education is steadfast in its belief that schools are the front line of prevention, early intervention, and healing. By expanding our behavioral health capacity, deepening partnerships, and investing in sustained wellness initiatives, we can ensure that every student has the support, safety, and care they deserve.

Thank you for your continued support and commitment to the health and well-being of our children and the future of the Virgin Islands.