



University of the Virgin Islands

School of Education

Office of the Dean

*“...to dedicate itself to the success of all students through its excellent teaching and to prepare competent and effective P-12 teachers and other school professionals, including school administrators and counselors, to function in highly complex and diverse settings and to promote academic excellence and student success in order to build a better future for individuals in the territory and the Caribbean.”*

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**On Behalf of President Safiya George**

TESTIMONY: The Current State of Special Education in the Territory  
The Committee on Education and Workforce Development  
May 9, 2025

Good day, Honorable Senator Kurt Vialet, Chair of the Senate Committee on Education and Workforce Development, distinguished members of this Committee, other members of the 36th Legislature, and the listening audience. I am Dr. Karen Harris Brown, Dean and Professor of the School of Education at the University of the Virgin Islands. I present this testimony on behalf of the University and our President, Dr. Safiya George.

I would like to begin with the following quote:

*“Disability is not inability — and in the Caribbean, where culture runs deep, participation and belonging must be woven into every layer of our communities.”*  
— Unknown

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony on the critical issue of special education in the Virgin Islands. I offer this testimony as a lifelong advocate for children and families with disabilities across the Virgin Islands and the wider Caribbean region.

Supporting special education from early childhood is critically important for fostering the lifelong development, learning, and well-being of children with disabilities. Early intervention not only helps children achieve developmental milestones but also reduces the need for more intensive support later in life. When implemented effectively, early childhood special education (ECSE) improves outcomes across cognitive, social-emotional, and behavioral domains.

### **Importance of Early Support**

#### **1. Maximizing Developmental Potential**

The early years (birth to age 5) are a period of rapid brain development. Providing services during this time capitalizes on brain plasticity, increasing the likelihood of successful learning and adaptation (Center on the Developing Child, 2007). Children who

receive early intervention services are more likely to develop foundational skills in communication, mobility, and social interaction.

2. **Improved Long-Term Outcomes**

According to the U.S. Department of Education, students who received early special education services demonstrated improved performance in academic settings, increased graduation rates, and greater postsecondary success (U.S. Department of Education, 2023).

3. **Reduction in Future Educational Costs**

Investment in early intervention can lead to significant cost savings. A landmark longitudinal study found that for every \$1 invested in early childhood programs, society saves up to \$7 in future special education, social service, and justice system costs (Heckman, 2011).

4. **Family Empowerment and Support**

Early support systems help families understand their child's needs and advocate effectively. When families are engaged early, they are better equipped to navigate education systems and support their child's progress.

5. **Equity and Access**

Children from historically marginalized communities—including those in the Caribbean and other underserved areas—often face compounding challenges in accessing timely evaluations and services. Disaggregated data reveal that children of color are less likely to be identified for early intervention and may experience delays in receiving services (National Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center, 2022).

## **Data Highlights**

- **Prevalence:** In 2021, over **1 million children under age 6** in the U.S. received services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Part C and Part B Section 619 (U.S. Department of Education, 2023).
- **Effectiveness:** A study by the Early Childhood Outcomes Center (2020) reported that **over 70% of children receiving early intervention services showed substantial improvement** in one or more developmental domains by the time they exited services.
- **Return on Investment:** James Heckman's research found a **7:1 return on investment (ROI)** for high-quality early childhood programs, particularly those supporting children with disabilities or from low-income backgrounds (Heckman, 2011).

## **U.S. Virgin Islands Context:**

According to the 2023 *KIDS COUNT USVI Data Book*, the number of students receiving special education services decreased slightly from 770 in SY 2021–2022 to 720 in SY 2022–2023, with the largest decline in the St. Thomas/St. John District (8%). Specific graduation rates for students with disabilities in the U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI) are not provided. However, data from the U.S. Department of Education indicates that in the 2022–2023 school year, 9% of public school students in the USVI were served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

In the Virgin Islands, and throughout the Caribbean, the lived experiences of individuals with disabilities are shaped by cultural norms, systemic barriers, and lingering stigma. While we have made strides in increasing awareness and expanding services, persistent challenges remain. It is

imperative that we continue to work collectively to ensure that students with disabilities are not only included but fully supported in every aspect of their educational journey.

Thank you for bringing us together to share our testimony on this critical matter. On behalf of President George, we are grateful for the opportunity to engage in thoughtful dialogue that addresses longstanding challenges, celebrates progress, and identifies strategic opportunities to improve services for students with disabilities. Equally important is the need to support the special education professionals who work tirelessly to uplift and empower these students throughout the Virgin Islands.

### **Key Challenges in Special Education in the Virgin Islands**

Despite dedicated efforts by educators, families, and support personnel, the special education system in the Virgin Islands continues to face persistent challenges that hinder our ability to fully meet the needs of students with disabilities.

- 1. Limited Access to Qualified Professionals**

The shortage of certified special education teachers, speech-language pathologists, school psychologists, and related service providers significantly impacts our ability to deliver timely and comprehensive services. Recruitment and retention are difficult due to geographic isolation, high turnover, and limited incentives.

- 2. Insufficient Interagency Collaboration**

While partnerships exist among the Departments of Education, Health, and Human Services, stronger coordination is needed to streamline assessments, interventions, and case management. Students and families often navigate multiple systems and experience unnecessary delays and gaps in service delivery.

- 3. Limited Inclusion and Transition Services**

Meaningful integration into general education remains inconsistent, and transition services preparing students for adulthood are underdeveloped.

- 4. Cultural Stigma and Public Awareness**

In the Caribbean context, including the Virgin Islands, cultural stigma surrounding disability continues to affect early identification, community support, and family engagement. Public education campaigns are critical to shifting perceptions.

These challenges must be addressed with a coordinated and sustained commitment from multiple sectors, guided by informed policy *and community voice*.

Additional partners to invite to this discussion include the VI Infants and Toddlers Program (ITP) and Vocational Rehabilitation services. The Infants and Toddlers Program (ITP) is a territory-wide, family-centered, multi-disciplinary system of early intervention services for infants and toddlers from birth through two years of age who have disabilities or developmental delays. Currently, the program is offered at no cost to parents in the USVI. In 2022, there were 137 participants in the ITP, with the vast majority (100) on St. Croix and just 37 in the St. Thomas/St. John District. Sixty-nine percent (69%) of the participants were male. Sixty-one

percent (61%) of the participants were Black. Twenty percent (20%) were Hispanic, and another 13 percent identified as multi-racial. White participants comprised 7 percent of ITP participants across the territory.

The Virgin Islands Vocational Rehabilitation services has traditionally been supported by a federal grant provided by the United States Department of Education. Organized in the Division of Disabilities and Rehabilitation Services, Vocational Rehabilitation (or Voc Rehab) services are related to the professional development of eligible individuals with disabilities. Eligibility standards include having a physical, intellectual, sensory, or mental impairment; an impairment that results in a substantial barrier to employment; in need of VR services to gain, retain, or regain employment; and can benefit from VR services to achieve an employment outcome.

**Students with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) are considered eligible** unless identified as “too significantly disabled” to benefit from the services.

### **The University of the Virgin Islands: Advancing Special Education Across the P–16 Continuum**

At the University of the Virgin Islands (UVI), supporting individuals with disabilities is a shared institutional commitment that spans early childhood through postsecondary education. Through its academic programs, research centers, and student services, UVI plays a critical role in strengthening the special education landscape across the P–16 pipeline in the Virgin Islands and beyond.

#### **UVI Eastern Caribbean Center**

The Eastern Caribbean Center (ECC) at the University of the Virgin Islands is a social science research institute with a longstanding partnership with the Virgin Islands Department of Education in producing a vital study of special education services in the USVI.

The Parent Satisfaction Survey is an annual initiative conducted by the Eastern Caribbean Center (ECC) on behalf of the Virgin Islands State Office of Special Education (SOSE). Since 2007, this survey has served as a critical tool for assessing the perspectives of parents and guardians of students receiving special education services in the US Virgin Islands. It is designed to evaluate the extent to which the Virgin Islands Department of Education is meeting its obligations under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), particularly in relation to the development and implementation of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). Each year, ECC partners with the State Office of Special Education (SOSE) to reach out to families and gather their feedback on the services and support that their children receive.

To facilitate the survey, SOSE provides ECC with an updated list of contact information for parents, guardians, and, in some cases, social workers of students who are actively receiving special education services. This list includes telephone numbers and relevant identifiers that allow ECC to conduct structured interviews using trained survey interviewers. Interviewers engage directly with participants in a confidential manner, collecting data that reflects satisfaction levels across a range of service indicators.

Upon completion of the data collection and analysis phases, ECC produces a comprehensive written report detailing the findings of the survey. In addition to the written report, ECC delivers a formal public presentation of the survey results. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, these presentations were conducted in person in both the St. Thomas/St. John and St. Croix districts. However, since 2020, the presentations have been held virtually to accommodate health and safety considerations. Due to increased attendance and broader accessibility, the decision was made to transition the annual public presentation to a permanent virtual format. This has enhanced public participation and ensured that more families and community partners can access and engage with the findings in a convenient and inclusive manner.

The Parent Satisfaction Survey continues to be a valuable mechanism for accountability, transparency, and continuous improvement in special education services throughout the US Virgin Islands.

### **UVI Disabilities Student Services (DSS)**

The University of the Virgin Islands (UVI) Disabilities Student Services (DSS), housed within the Campus Counseling Services Office, offers a comprehensive support framework for students with disabilities. The accommodation process is designed to be interactive and student-centered. Once a student is approved for reasonable accommodations, based on documentation and a collaborative discussion, a formal accommodation letter is generated. This letter, sent confidentially via DocuSign to both the student and their instructors, outlines the accommodations. Professors are reminded to treat all disability-related information as confidential, ensuring private discussions rather than public or classroom-based exchanges. Each semester, students must submit a Semester Request for Services through Health Hub, specifying which courses require accommodations. This flexible system respects student agency, acknowledging that accommodations may not be necessary for every course.

UVI's DSS process is built on non-discriminatory practices and adheres to national implementation standards, including guidance from the ADA Center at Cornell and resources from AHEAD (Association on Higher Education and Disability). A grievance policy is in place to ensure fairness, allowing review only if a discriminatory practice is alleged.

Technology plays a significant role in supporting UVI students. Free speech-to-text and text-to-speech software enhances communication and coursework for all students, not only those with disabilities. UVI's learning management system, media platforms, and website include embedded assistive technology features that comply with legal accessibility standards.

The university embraces universal design for learning through diverse instructional strategies such as project-based learning, flipped classrooms, experiential and inquiry-based learning, and blended formats that combine virtual and in-person sessions. Tutoring options include 24/7 access to Brainfuse, as well as in-person and virtual sessions available through the Bucs Connect portal. Peer-to-peer models, including group projects and Peer-Led Team Learning in math, promote collaborative learning aligned with modern workplace demands.

The National Student Exchange (NSE) program further enhances learning by allowing students to study at partner institutions across the U.S. and Canada while maintaining UVI tuition. These experiences, considered transformative by many participants, include appropriate accommodations aligned with ADA guidelines.

DSS supports students with a wide range of disabilities, including specific learning disabilities, medical conditions, sensory impairments, neurodiverse profiles (e.g., autism, ADHD), physical disabilities, and psychological conditions (e.g., PTSD, bipolar disorder, severe anxiety). Importantly, under ADA provisions, students must be "otherwise qualified" to participate in college-level programs. Common accommodations include extended time for timed assessments. Many courses now offer testing windows, but where fixed testing times exist, extended time can be provided. For students with sensory impairments, accessibility features such as larger text, closed captions, background contrast, and descriptive media are standard across UVI's digital platforms. Physical accommodations are coordinated with campus facilities and include accessible bathrooms, elevators, and priority parking. If mobility challenges arise (e.g., inaccessible upper-floor classrooms or inoperable elevators), UVI reassigns classes or provides shuttle access accordingly. While accommodations are broad, they do not include personal services or devices such as wheelchairs or personal attendants. There is currently no dedicated testing center on either campus, a service common in mainland institutions that benefit from federal funding not extended to U.S. territories.

To assist students in transitioning from college to the workforce, UVI Career Services offers inclusive events and services—resume writing, internships, LinkedIn profile development, and more. DSS ensures accommodations are in place where needed. A Job Placement Plan (JPP), currently in development, aims to certify students' career readiness for prospective employers. Collaborations with local government agencies are essential to making this initiative viable and impactful.

It is important to note that UVI currently has no designated budget for DSS. Instead, services are coordinated across multiple divisions, including Campus Counseling Services, Student Affairs, and Information Services & Institutional Assessment. A dedicated funding stream would significantly enhance the university's ability to support students with disabilities effectively and sustainably.

### **UVI School of Education**

The School of Education at the University of the Virgin Islands prepares individuals to work with children and adolescents with disabilities through a variety of ways. EDU 302 Introduction to Special Education is an introductory course at the undergraduate level, designed to expose adult learners to children with exceptionalities. The course focuses on the various categories of disabilities, the associated characteristics, etiology, prevalence, causes, and academic interventions based on the nature of the disability. In addition to this standalone course, the Postbaccalaureate Certificate in Special Education program is a graduate-level program that was co-developed with the Virgin Islands Department of Education (VIDE), through the Territorial Offices of Special Education (District & State). This collaboration addressed the critical need to increase the quantity and quality of certified Special Education teachers in the Territory. In 2021, the Department funded a cohort of 13 teachers as part of a "grow your own" initiative. Currently, the Bachelor of Arts in Inclusive Early Childhood Education (IECE) program is undergoing program modifications to better align it to the three professional organizations for special education, early childhood, and early intervention/early childhood special education: Council of

Exceptional Children (CEC), the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the Division of Early Childhood (DEC).

When we think about special education, we must also think beyond the role of special educators, to include other related personnel, such as educational diagnosticians, behavior therapists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, school psychologists, and speech-language pathologists. In 2022, the VIDE committed to fund another cohort to complete the Education Specialist (EdS) degree in School Psychology program through our joint “grow your own” initiative. The mission of this program is to prepare individuals for a career in school psychology as defined by the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) and produce practitioners and scholars whose activities promote the psychological and educational development and well-being of diverse children and youth in the Virgin Islands and the larger Caribbean community. School psychology and special education are closely connected through their shared focus on identifying and supporting students with learning, behavioral, and developmental needs. School psychologists play a critical role in assessing students, developing individualized education programs (IEPs), and collaborating with educators and families to ensure appropriate interventions and services. Currently, five talented, persistent scholars are in their final year of the program. They are scheduled to start their final academic year, 2025-2026 in August, where they will enroll in their first of two semester-long internships. While up to 20 funded slots were made available, only these five students took the challenge. Greater efforts are needed to create incentives that elevate this field as a desirable and sustainable career option.

There is a significant scarcity of qualified professionals to provide speech-language service delivery to children residing in the USVI. Having as much as 40 miles of ocean separating the main inhabited islands further impacts service delivery. Consequently, the USVI is challenged with meeting the varied needs of school-age populations with speech and language/communication disabilities. These shortages inhibit the capacity of individuals with speech and language/communication disabilities to achieve their full academic, social, and emotional potential (ASHA, 2022). Given the challenges and immediate needs, the solution must be accomplished in an innovative, yet practical way. The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) utilizes the term *speech-language pathology assistant* (SLPA) to refer to personnel who support speech-language pathologists (SLPs) to carry out the treatment of communication disorders (ASHA, 2022; ASHA b, n.d.). SLPs supervise the work of the *speech-language pathology assistant* (SLPA). Currently under review by the UVI Curriculum Committee is a Speech-Language Pathology Assistant (SLPA) Program proposal.

In January 2025, Governor Albert Bryan Jr. signed legislation establishing the Board of Speech-Language Pathology and Audiology. This new board sets licensure standards for audiologists, speech-language pathologists (SLPs), and their assistants, ensuring professional oversight and quality care within the territory. The legislation also marks the USVI's entry into the Audiology and Speech-Language Pathology Interstate Compact (ASLP-IC), making it the first U.S. territory and the 35th jurisdiction overall to join. This compact facilitates interstate practice and telehealth services for licensed professionals, enhancing access to care across member states. This initiative was achieved through collaboration with the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA), reflecting a shared commitment to expanding access to high-quality speech and hearing services in the territory. By aligning with ASHA's standards and the Audiology and Speech-Language Pathology Interstate Compact (ASLP-IC) framework, the USVI aims to address local

healthcare workforce needs and improve service delivery through streamlined licensure and cross-jurisdictional practice. As a speech-language pathologist licensed in the state of Georgia and previously, Florida, someone with a doctorate in special education, and the current chair of the International Issues Board of the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, I find this news to be very encouraging and a long time coming.

### **Virgin Islands University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (VIUCEDD)**

Housed in the UVI School of Education, the Virgin Islands University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (VIUCEDD) is one of 70 UCEDDs in the U.S. and its territories. VIUCEDD offers a comprehensive range of support services designed for students with disabilities across various educational levels, including K-12 and the University of the Virgin Islands (UVI). These services include access to UVI's specialized office for disability services, assistive technology selection and training for students, and interdisciplinary professional development initiatives to enhance the educational experience for individuals with disabilities.

Interdisciplinary pretraining preparation programs, such as Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental and Related Disabilities (LEND) Programs, prepare professionals from various fields to effectively collaborate and serve individuals with disabilities. This approach fosters a holistic understanding of disability, promotes shared knowledge and skills, and prepares future leaders for inclusive environments. Annually, VIUCEDD, in collaboration with the Westchester Institute for Human Development and the School of Health Sciences and Practice, New York Medical College, selects up to two new trainees in the St. Croix District to acquire training in skills required by leadership advocates in the field of developmental disabilities. The School of Education also engages Virgin Islanders as LEND fellows and trainees through a partnership with the Vermont LEND program, housed at the University of Vermont's School of Medicine. The LEND training programs aim to improve the educational outcomes of infants, children, and adolescents with disabilities in the U.S. Virgin Islands.

An additional opportunity for professional development is the annual Autism Conference, conducted across both the St. Thomas/St. John and St. Croix districts. This conference caters to early childhood education professionals, educators, administrators, parents, and various service providers, offering them vital insights into contemporary research and evidence-based practices. The sessions emphasize innovative strategies applicable in diverse settings, ranging from clinical environments to educational institutions. This empowers professionals to deliver optimal care and support for individuals with autism, along with a thorough examination of the latest advancements in autism care.

VIUCEDD's assistive technology program is dedicated to delivering comprehensive educational training and expert technical assistance that focuses on a variety of assistive technology resources. This includes guidance on the effective pairing of assistive technology devices, such as communication aids, adaptive tools, and software applications, tailored to meet the unique needs of each person as appropriate. The primary objective of this initiative is to empower educators, parents, and students with disabilities within the St. Croix and St. Thomas/St. John districts. By providing these crucial resources and support services, the AT program enhances



educational accessibility and inclusion, ensuring that all students are equipped to successfully navigate their K-12 education as well as their transition to post-secondary opportunities. VIUCEDD's efforts aim to establish an environment that promotes the thriving and academic success of all learners.

### **Summary**

As an educator and practitioner, I have witnessed the transformative power of interprofessional collaboration in advancing inclusive education and improving outcomes for individuals with disabilities. This interdisciplinary foundation has solidified my commitment to fostering environments where education, health, human services, and workforce development converge to provide culturally responsive and developmentally appropriate services.

In tightly knit communities like the U.S. Virgin Islands, where specialized resources are often limited, such collaborative efforts are not merely beneficial—they are essential. Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) plays a pivotal role in this framework, offering timely interventions that capitalize on critical periods of brain development, thereby enhancing cognitive, social-emotional, and behavioral outcomes.

Despite strides made, challenges persist, including shortages of qualified professionals, fragmented interagency coordination, inconsistent inclusion practices, and cultural stigmas surrounding disabilities. Institutions like the University of the Virgin Islands (UVI) are at the forefront of addressing these issues through initiatives such as the Eastern Caribbean Center's Parent Satisfaction Survey, the Disabilities Student Services (DSS) office, and specialized training programs in special education and school psychology. Moreover, the establishment of the Virgin Islands University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (VIUCEDD) underscores a commitment to interdisciplinary training, assistive technology, and community engagement.

The recent legislation establishing the Board of Speech-Language Pathology and Audiology, along with the U.S. Virgin Islands' entry into the Audiology and Speech-Language Pathology Interstate Compact (ASLP-IC), marks a significant advancement in enhancing access to quality care and professional oversight within the territory.

Collectively, these efforts signify a robust commitment to ensuring that individuals with disabilities are not only included but are empowered to thrive academically, socially, and economically.

### **Key Recommendations**

1. Establish legislative appropriation with a dedicated budget line for DSS to support sustainable operations and accommodations. This would include but not be limited to:
  - Developing a centralized testing center on each campus to provide extended-time and distraction-reduced testing environments
  - Supporting the professional development of the DSS coordinators to keep abreast of best practices
  - Increasing university-led targeted faculty, PreK-12 teacher, and staff training on neurodiverse learning strategies and accessibility tools.
2. Expand public education campaigns to reduce stigma and raise awareness about disabilities in the Virgin Islands.

3. Strengthen the interagency collaboration across education, health, social services, and workforce development.
4. Improve physical accessibility infrastructure across the territory.
5. Accelerate implementation of the Job Placement Plan (JPP) in partnership with local government agencies.
6. Scale up recruitment and preparation pathways for special education and allied health professionals in the territory.

### **Closing Reflection**

As a Virgin Islands society, we have a collective responsibility to ensure that individuals with disabilities are not only protected by policy but also empowered through opportunity. Supporting their full participation in education, employment, and community life is not an act of charity—it is a measure of our commitment to justice and shared humanity.

I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge and extend my sincere thanks to the many UVI colleagues who contributed to the development of this testimony by providing valuable information from their respective units.

Senator Violet and Members of the Committee on Education and Workforce Development, on behalf of the University of the Virgin Islands and our President, Dr. Safiya George, again, thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony.

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