

REFORMING, REBUILDING, AND REBRANDING PUBLIC EDUCATION

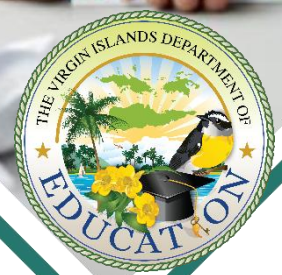
VIRGIN ISLANDS DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT
36TH LEGISLATURE OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

MAY 9, 2025

Presented By:

Dr. Dionne Wells-Hedrington

Commissioner



Dionne Wells-Heddrington, Ed.D.
Commissioner

GOVERNMENT OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS
**DEPARTMENT OF
EDUCATION**



St. Thomas: 1834 Kongens Gade, Charlotte Amalie
St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands 00802-6746

St. Croix: 2133 Hospital Street, Christiansted
St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands 00820-4665

Tel: (340) 774-0100
dionne.wells@vide.vi
www.vide.vi

May 2, 2025

The Honorable Kurt Vialet
Chairman
Committee on Education and Workforce Development
36th Legislature of the Virgin Islands
No. 20 Estate Golden Rock
Christiansted, St. Croix, Virgin Islands 00820

Sent electronically via senatorkurtvialet@legvi.org

Dear Senator Vialet,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify and provide updates on matters critical to the Virgin Islands Department of Education. Your continued commitment to the students and schools of the Virgin Islands is greatly appreciated.

This testimony provides an in-depth overview of special education policies, services, and programs offered in Virgin Islands public schools. It outlines our compliance with both federal and local special education laws, including the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and addresses the challenges we face in meeting these mandates. We also highlight budget and resource allocations for special education programs, identifying where critical gaps remain.

Thank you again for your attention and continued support of the Virgin Islands Department of Education. Please do not hesitate to contact me for additional information or clarification.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Dionne Wells-Heddrington".

Dionne Wells-Heddrington, Ed.D.
Commissioner

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Statement by the Commissioner

Good morning, Committee Chair, Senator Kurt A. Violet; Vice-chair, Senator Avery L. Lewis; other committee members: Senator Marise C. James, Senator Dwayne M. DeGraff, Senator Franklin D. Johnson, and Senator Carla J. Joseph; other members of the 36th legislature, listening and viewing audience. I am Dr. Dionne Wells-Hedrington, Commissioner of the Virgin Islands Department of Education (VIDE/the Department). Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. It is an honor to discuss Special Education in the territory, a matter that is vital to the success and well-being of our students, our communities, and our collective future.

As Commissioner of Education, my responsibility is to ensure that every child, regardless of background or circumstance, has access to a high-quality, rigorous, and supportive educational experience. Our work is rooted in the fundamental belief that education is not just a pathway to opportunity — it is the foundation of a strong, just, and prosperous society.

Present with me today are members of my leadership team: Mr. Victor Somme III, Assistant Commissioner; Dr. Renee Charleswell, Deputy Commissioner of Curriculum and Instructions; Ms. Hasina Harris, Deputy Commissioner of Fiscal and Administrative Services; Dr. Sharlene Belton-Gonzalez, Insular Superintendent-St. Croix District; Dr. Carla Bastian-Knight, Deputy Superintendent-St. Croix District; Andrea Shillingford, Deputy Superintendent, St. Croix District; Dr. Tanya Lockhart, Director Special Education, St. Croix District; Desha S. Powell, St. Thomas-St. John Deputy Superintendent; Ellen Masters, Director of Special Education, St. Thomas-St John District; Khadila Joseph, Director of Procurement; and Chaneel Callwood, SPMO Representative and Liaison.

Today, we will provide an overview of special education services provided by the Virgin Islands Department of Education (VIDE). Our testimony highlights key areas including services offered, compliance with federal laws, enrollment trends, budget challenges and ongoing initiatives.

Special Education in the Virgin Islands Public Schools

An Overview of Special Education Policies, Services, and Programs

The Special Education Program in the U.S. Virgin Islands is essential in supporting students with disabilities by ensuring they receive equitable access to education, in accordance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), a federal law that mandates appropriate educational services for children with disabilities.

The Virgin Islands Department of Education, State Office of Special Education (VIDE/SOSE), oversees special education services across the Territory. The territory serves a diverse student population, and special education programs aim to meet individual needs through services like individualized education programs (IEPs), speech

therapy, occupational therapy, and behavioral support. Despite these efforts, the Virgin Islands faces several challenges in delivering high-quality special education services. These include limited funding, shortages of specialized staff (such as school psychologists, speech-language pathologists and special education teachers), and infrastructure issues. These factors continue to hinder consistent service delivery and impact student outcomes.

However, there have been ongoing efforts to improve our system. The VIDE has partnered with federal agencies such as the Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center (ECTAC), the Center for IDEA Fiscal Reporting (CIFR), the National Technical Assistance Center on Transition (NTACT), IDEA Data Center (IDC), and the Consortium for Appropriate Dispute Resolution in Special Education (CADRE) to address compliance issues and to develop more robust monitoring and support systems. Local advocacy groups and parents have also played a crucial role in advocating for reforms and better resources.

In recent years, there has been an increasing emphasis on inclusive education, with schools striving to incorporate students with disabilities into general education classrooms whenever feasible. This approach reflects a broader recognition that inclusion enriches the learning experience for all students by promoting empathy, embracing diversity, and encouraging collaboration.

Improving special education in the Virgin Islands will require sustained investments, strong leadership, and a commitment to fairness to and for students. By addressing current gaps and building existing strengths, the territory can create a more supportive and effective educational environment for all learners.

Overview of Special Education Policies, Services and Programs

The Virgin Islands Department of Education is comprised of a State Office of Special Education (SOSE) that serves as the regulatory arm for the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs and Services (OSEP). SOSE main function is to ensure that the Local Educational Agencies (LEAs or District Office of Special Education) are providing Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). The State Education Agency (SEA) is responsible for the state's oversight and support for the delivery of all special education services provided in the U.S. Virgin Islands under the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The SOSE is responsible for the general supervision, monitoring and enforcement of all IDEA Part B and Act 4667 Regulations.

The VIDE offers special education services to help students with disabilities succeed. Students can receive services under an Individualized plan. The goal is to include students with disabilities in regular classrooms whenever possible. Each student is given the best opportunity to learn alongside their peers.

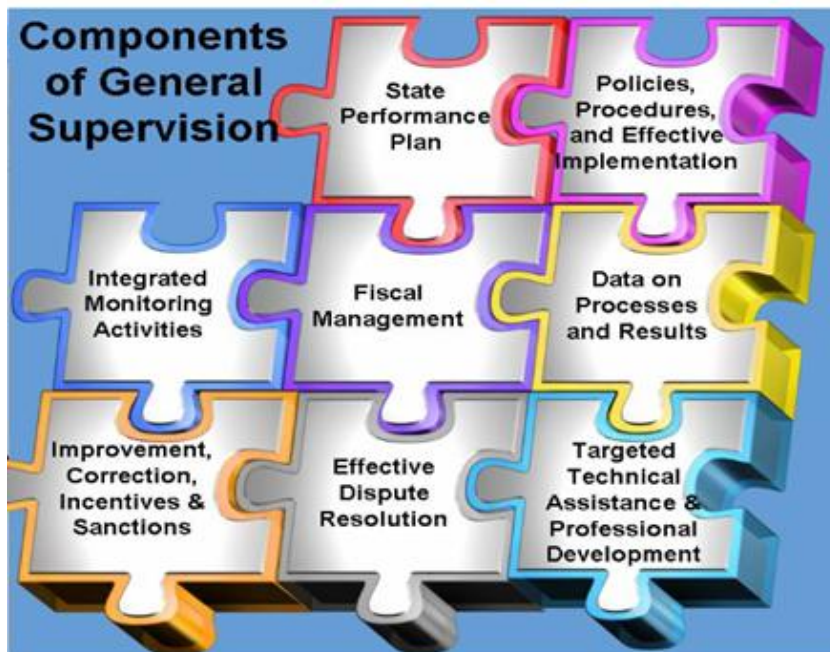
Role of the State Division of Special Education

The SOSE's primary focus of Federal and State monitoring activities are as follows:

- (A) improving educational results and functional outcomes for all children with disabilities; and*
- (B) ensuring that States meet the program requirements under this part, with a particular emphasis on those requirements that are most closely related to improving educational results for children with disabilities.*

To support this, SOSE offers technical assistance and professional development to LEAs, promoting high-quality education and student success. A coordinated general supervision system integrates monitoring, data collection, fiscal oversight, policies, and enforcement mechanisms—such as improvement plans and corrective actions—to meet IDEA Part B requirements which include integrated monitoring activities; data on processes and results; the SPP/APR; fiscal management; policies, procedures, and practices resulting in effective implementation; and improvement, correction, incentives, and sanctions.

Each of the eight (8) components is depicted below.



Role of the District Division of Special Education

The Local Educational Agencies (LEAs)—St. Thomas-St. John and St. Croix Districts—are directly responsible for delivering special education services to students. Their key responsibilities include:

- **Child Find:** Issuing annual public notices to identify children ages 3–21 who may need special education services.
- **Evaluation:** Conducting timely assessments for students suspected of having disabilities.
- **Service Coordination:** Ensuring schools provide IEP-mandated services such as transportation, speech therapy, academic support, and counseling.
- **Compliance Monitoring:** Enforcing adherence to IDEA and other applicable laws.
- **Staff Training:** Supporting professional development for teachers, aides, and service providers.
- **Family Engagement:** Advocating for students and addressing parent concerns.
- **Data Reporting:** Collecting and submitting required data to SOSE and the U.S. Department of Education (OSEP).
- **Transition Planning:** Organizing services starting at age 16 (or earlier if needed) to support post-school success.

Special Education Continuum of Placement Options

Special education in public schools encompasses a range of services tailored to meet the unique needs of students with disabilities. There is no one-size-fits-all model; instead, services are customized through an Individualized Education Program (IEP) to support each student's learning. Under federal law, students should be educated alongside their non-disabled peers as much as possible—this is known as the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). The IEP team uses the Special Education Continuum of Placement Options to determine the most appropriate setting for each student.

Early Childhood Children Ages 3-5 (excluding 5-year-olds who are not in kindergarten)

- Children attending regular Early Childhood Programs for at least 10 hours per week
- Children attending regular Early Childhood Programs for less than 10 hours per week
- Children attending Special Education Programs (not in any Regular Early Childhood Program)
- Children attending neither Regular Early Childhood Programs nor a Special Education Program

School-Aged Children ages 6-21 (including 5-year-olds who are in kindergarten)

- General Education Classroom with support (inside the general education classroom 80% or more of the school day)
- General Education Classroom with extended support (inside the general education classroom from 79% to 40% of the school day)

- Separate classes (inside the general education classroom less than 40% of the school day)
- Separate School
- Residential Facility
- Homebound/Hospital
- Correctional Facility
- Parentally placed in private schools

Difference between Services and Support in Special Education

In special education, "supports" and "services" are terms that help students with learning and thinking differences, but they mean different things. *Supports* are changes in how and what students learn to help them succeed, like extra time for tests or using audiobooks. *Services* are specific help in areas like speech or motor skills, such as speech therapy or occupational therapy. Both can be part of an Individualized Education Program (IEP), a 504 plan, or a response to intervention (RTI).

The services and support for one child/youth may be very different from those of another student. It's all about the individual child and giving them the resources they need to progress in school. For example, some students may spend most of the day in a general education classroom. In contrast, others may spend just an hour or two in a resource room working with a specialist or might need to attend a different school specializing in teaching children with learning disabilities. Students who qualify for special education have an **Individualized Education Program** (IEP) and receive individualized instruction and other resources at no cost to their families. Specialists work with students on their strengths and challenges. More importantly, families are key team members who decide what students need to thrive in school.

Compliance with Federal and Local Special Education Laws

The Virgin Islands Department of Education, State Office of Special Education (SOSE) is guided by the Special Education Procedures Manual, to assist schools and local education agencies (LEA) in complying with the requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the U. S. Virgin Islands Department of Education's (VIDE) Special Education Rules. Compliance with the IDEA, the federal regulations implementing the IDEA, and the Special Education Rules is required for all public and private agencies providing publicly funded special education services and supports to eligible children with disabilities across the Territory of the U. S. Virgin Islands.

Additionally, under federal and local law the Notice of Procedural Safeguard explains the rights available to a parent or child under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). It is available in English, Spanish, and Haitian Creole.

What is the Individuals with Disabilities Educational Act (IDEA)?

The Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) is the federal law that governs special education in the United States. Under IDEA, public schools are required to identify and evaluate students who are suspected of having disabilities – a process known as “Child Find” – at no cost to families. For a child to receive services under IDEA, they must be diagnosed with a qualifying disability and demonstrate a need for special education to succeed academically. Accessing these services involves a legal process designed to protect the rights of both the child and their parents or guardians. IDEA provides these protections from birth through high school graduation or until the age of 21, whichever comes first.

Qualifiers:

Have a documented disability in one of the 13 documented disability categories covered by IDEA. The terms/disability categories used in this definition of a child with a disability are defined as follows:

1. **Autism** (AUT) means a developmental disability significantly affecting verbal and nonverbal communication and social interaction, generally evident before age three that adversely affects a child’s educational performance.
2. **Deaf blindness** (DB) means concomitant hearing and visual impairments, the combination of which causes such severe communication and other developmental and educational needs.
3. **Deafness** (DF) means a hearing impairment that is so severe that the child is impaired in processing linguistic information through hearing, with or without amplification that adversely affects a child’s educational performance.
4. **Emotional Disturbance** (ED) means a condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree that adversely affects a child’s educational performance:
 - *An inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors.*
 - *An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers.*
 - *Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances.*
 - *A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression.*
 - *A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems.*

5. **Hearing Impairment (HI)** means an impairment in hearing, whether permanent or fluctuating, that adversely affects a child's educational performance but that is not included under the definition of deafness in this section.

6. **Intellectual Disability (ID)** means significantly subaverage general intellectual functioning, existing concurrently with deficits in adaptive behavior and manifested during the developmental period that adversely affects a child's educational performance. The term "intellectual disability" was formerly termed "mental retardation."

7. **Multiple Disabilities (MD)** means concomitant impairments (such as intellectual disability-blindness or intellectual disability-orthopedic impairment), the combination of which causes such severe educational needs that they cannot be accommodated in special education programs solely for one of the impairments. Multiple disabilities do not include deaf-blindness.

8. **Orthopedic Impairment (OI)** means a severe orthopedic impairment that adversely affects a child's educational performance. The term includes impairments caused by congenital anomaly, impairments caused by disease (e.g., poliomyelitis, bone tuberculosis), and impairments from other causes (e.g., cerebral palsy, amputations, and fractures or burns that cause contractures).

9. **Other Health Impairment (OHI)** means having limited strength, vitality, or alertness, including a heightened alertness to environmental stimuli, that results in limited alertness with respect to the educational environment, that—is due to chronic or acute health problems such as asthma, attention deficit disorder or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, diabetes, epilepsy, a heart condition, hemophilia, lead poisoning, leukemia, nephritis, rheumatic fever, sickle cell anemia, and Tourette Syndrome; and adversely affects a child's educational performance.

10. **Specific Learning Disability (SLD)** means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations, including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. *Disorders not included.*

- *Specific learning disability does not include learning problems that are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, intellectual*

disability, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage.

11. Speech or Language Impairment (SLI) means a communication disorder, such as stuttering, impaired articulation, language impairment, or a voice impairment that adversely affects a child's educational performance

12. Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) means an acquired injury to the brain caused by an external physical force, resulting in total or partial functional disability or psychosocial impairment, or both, that adversely affects a child's educational performance. TBI applies to open or closed head injuries resulting in impairments in one or more areas, such as cognition; language; memory; reasoning; abstract thinking; judgment; problem-solving; sensory, perceptual, and motor abilities; psychosocial behavior; physical functions; information processing; and speech. TBI does not apply to brain injuries that are congenital or degenerative, or to brain injuries induced by birth trauma.

13. Visual Impairment, including blindness, means an impairment in vision that, even with correction, adversely affects a child's educational performance. The term includes both partial sight and blindness.

Finally, the student must:

- Need special education to access the general education curriculum
- Under the IDEA, **access** is an important term in education. Making learning accessible to children with disabilities means finding ways to remove the barriers to their learning. School districts must have a process in place to determine which students are eligible for special education. This process involves a full evaluation that looks at the ways children/youth think. It also looks at other aspects of development. Either the school or a child's family can request an evaluation. If the school agrees to evaluate, the district will conduct the testing at no cost to the family.

What is an evaluation for special education?

- A special education evaluation will show if a child has a disability and needs specialized instruction and support.
- These evaluations go by many names, including *special education assessments, school evaluation, and IEP evaluation*.
- An evaluation for special education will show a child's strengths and challenges

When children are having trouble with academics or behavior, there's a process that schools can use to find out what's causing these struggles. This process is called an

“evaluation for special education.” The goal is to see if a child has a disability and needs specialized instruction and support.

- Having the school and family agree that a child needs an evaluation
- Gathering school data, like test scores and discipline records
- Giving questionnaires to teachers and parents or caregivers (and sometimes to the child) to get a full picture of how the child is doing at school and at home
- Having the child tested by a psychologist to see how the child thinks and solves problems
- Having the child tested by at least one other professional, like a speech therapist for children who have trouble expressing themselves
- Observing the child in a classroom or other school setting
- Meeting to discuss the evaluation’s findings and decide if the child qualifies for special education

Federal law says schools need to complete the evaluation process within 60 days. But some states have shorter timelines. In the U. S. Virgin Islands, that timeline is 45 days, which was approved by the U. S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs and Services, due to numerous violations and the Nadine Jones Consent Decree.

The consent decree, proposed in 2006, aimed to address systemic deficiencies in the Virgin Islands' special education services. Key provisions included:

- Establishing timely mechanisms for impartial due process hearings.
- Ensuring prompt development of IEPs within ten days following eligibility meetings.
- Enhancing procedures for evaluating and determining eligibility for special education services.
- Improving compliance with IDEA mandates to provide free and appropriate public education to students with disabilities

The evaluation process can create lots of different emotions for families. But after the evaluation, they should have a clear picture of their child’s strengths and challenges and an understanding of how to help their child thrive.

There are also different terms for tests that may be part of the evaluation:

- Psychoeducational evaluation or cognitive testing, which looks at how a child thinks
- Educational evaluation, which looks at a child’s academic skills
- Functional assessment, which looks at how a child behaves

Steps in Creating an IEP

1. Referral and Evaluation

A student is referred for evaluation through a formal request by a teacher, parent,

or other school personnel. The evaluation assesses areas like academics, behavior, speech, and physical development.

Regulation: 34 C.F.R. § 300.301 – Initial evaluations.

2. Eligibility Determination

A team of qualified professionals and the parent determines if the child qualifies under one of the 13 disability categories defined by IDEA.

Regulation: 34 C.F.R. § 300.306 – Determination of eligibility.

3. IEP Team Formation

The IEP team must include:

- a. Parents/guardians
- b. At least one general education teacher
- c. At least one special education teacher
- d. A school district representative
- e. An individual who can interpret evaluation results (can be one of the above)
- f. The student (when appropriate)

Regulation: 34 C.F.R. § 300.321 – IEP Team.

4. IEP Meeting & Development

The team meets to develop the IEP, which includes:

- a. Present levels of academic achievement and functional performance (PLAAFP)
- b. Measurable annual goals
- c. Description of special education, related services, and accommodations
- d. Participation with non-disabled peers
- e. Modifications for state/district tests
- f. Transition services (starting at age 16, or younger if appropriate)

Regulation: 34 C.F.R. § 300.320 – Definition of IEP.

5. Implementation

The school implements the IEP as written, with teachers and service providers informed of their responsibilities.

Regulation: 34 C.F.R. § 300.323 – When IEPs must be in effect.

6. Annual Review and Reevaluation

The IEP is reviewed at least once a year, and a full reevaluation must occur at least every three years, unless agreed otherwise.

Regulation:

- a. 34 C.F.R. § 300.324 – Development, review, and revision of IEP.
- b. 34 C.F.R. § 300.303 – Reevaluations.

Challenges the Department Faces in Meeting These Mandates

State Level Challenges

As noted in the VIDE/SOSE's State Performance Plan/Annual Performance Report (SPP/APR) submitted in February 2024 (FFY2023), the VIDE is continuing to experience infrastructural challenges of the COVID-19 global pandemic, which impacted the delivery of academic instructions for FFY 2023 (2023-24 school year) for students with and without disabilities. These challenges also hampered the States' onsite and results in indicator monitoring activities which consists of (classroom observations, teacher and administrator's interview, student interviews).

Staff Shortages

- Compliance Monitors
- Transition Supervisor
- Administrative Officer

District Level Challenges

There is an urgent and growing need for more Special Education (SPED) teachers and paraprofessionals in the St. Croix (STX) District. While efforts continue to identify and assess students in need of special education services, a critical shortage of qualified personnel and adequate classroom space is making it increasingly difficult to meet those needs. Even when students are deemed eligible for support, the lack of available staff and resources creates barriers to delivering the services they require—and are legally entitled to receive. This shortage directly impacts students' ability to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally, and places additional strain on existing educators and support teams. Addressing this issue must be a top priority to ensure that all students, regardless of ability, receive a fair and appropriate education.

St. Croix District

SPED teachers and paraprofessionals needed to sustain SPED programs are listed in the table below.

SCHOOL	SPED TEACHERS NEEDED	SPED PARA	COMMENTS
Claude O. Markoe	2	4	
Ricardo Richards	3	3	
Lew Muckle	2	3	
Juanita Gardine	3	4	2 teachers are returning to the Philippines
John H. Woodson	1	3	1 Paraprofessional retiring
Alfredo Andrews	1	3	1 Teacher retiring
Eulalie Rivera		1	
HeadStart Program	2		

SPED Programs are needed in the following schools:

- Claude O. Markoe Elementary School
- Ricardo Richards Elementary School
- Lew Muckle Elementary School
- Juanita Gardine K-8 School
- John H. Woodson

Related Service Providers needed

4 Register Behavior Technicians (RBT)
1 Bilingual School Psychologist

2 Bilingual Social Worker
 1 Bilingual Speech Therapist
 2 Educational Diagnostician

SPED Office Building

Currently the SPED office AC is being fixed. However, manpower is needed to remove filing cabinets and supplies to Arthur Richards.

Still waiting to relocate (temporary) at Arthur Richards School A250-A255

- Deep cleaning
- Perform air quality test
- Manpower/Movers needed

Still awaiting to be fixed in the SPED office:

- Downstairs Lady's Restroom
- Central AC
- Deep cleaning of rooms and cubicles
- Painting
- Perform air quality test

St. Thomas - St. John District

There is a critical shortage of certified special education teachers, especially Hearing and Vision Impaired teachers, related service providers (e.g., speech-language pathologists, social workers, occupational and physical therapists), and school psychologists. As a result, we continue to contract for these services. This also has resulted in a backlog of evaluations.

SPED teachers and paras needed to sustain SPED programs.

SCHOOL	SPED TEACHERS NEEDED	SPED PARA	COMMENTS
HeadStart	1		
Ulla F. Muller	1	1	1 Resource teacher needed; one sped paraprofessional is leaving at the end of 2025

Lockhart K-8	3	3	<p>1 teacher for the Autism Primary class; 2 additional paras will be needed (It will be a full class with 10 students)</p> <p>1 additional intermediate teacher and para needed and 1 MS teacher and para needs to be replaced due to retirement</p>
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Yvonne Milliner-Bowsky School	1 (new class)	3	<p>1 additional class needed (classes will be at full capacity). Autism first grade is now needed. Safety and sensory needs must be met so 2 paras are needed for the new class</p> <p>A Visually Impaired student needs a 1:1 paraprofessional.</p>
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Joseph Gomez	1	1	Behavior Class (new)
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Julius Sprauve School	1	1	1 Teacher retired last school year
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CAHS	1	2	Positions that have not been replaced due to staff retiring
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			in the past two years.
Ivanna Eudora Kean High School	1		Teacher will leave at the end of the school year
Bertha C. Boschulte Middle School	1		Replacement for a paraprofessional that resigned

The number of therapists needed to be contracted annually to meet the needs of our students:

- Speech Language Pathologists – 5
- Bilingual Speech Language Pathologists (Spanish) - 1
- Bilingual Speech Language Pathologists (French Creole) - 1
- Board Certified Behavioral Analyst (BCBA) - 2
- Registered Behavioral Technicians - 6
- Occupational Therapist (OT) - 2
- Physical Therapist (PT) - 1
- Teacher of the Visually Impaired (TVI) - 1
- Teacher of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (TVI) - 1
- Sign Language Interpreters (SLI) - 2
- Psychologists - 2
- Bilingual Psychologists (Spanish) - 1
- Bilingual Psychologists (French Creole) - 1
- Educational Diagnosticians – 3
- Licensed Certified/Clinical Social Workers (LCSW)
- Licensed Certified/Clinical Social Workers (Spanish)

Budget and Resource Allocation for Special Education Programs

The IDEA Supplemental Grants to States for the Territory of the Virgin Islands have averaged around 8.5 million annually for the past five years. The grant funds are distributed in three primary segments: the two Local Education Agencies (LEAs) and the State Office of Special Education (SOSE), using allocation rules outlined for this grant. The annual award amount is closely linked to the number of children/youths served under Part B of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) throughout the territory. However, for several years, the United States Department of Education (USDOE) allowed the Territory, State, and District to benefit from a relatively stable award amount up until 2023. At that time, the award experienced a sharp cut of \$1,257,065, impacting the special education

services in the Virgin Islands. Despite this cut, the SOSE has maintained the same distribution standard for the LEAs regarding the base payment and any available funds while only retaining 11% for SOSE operations.

In addition to the IDEA Grant to States, each District Office of Special Education (DOSE) receives an annual local allotment for operations, support for personnel, and a small portion for supplies. The STTJ District has maintained roughly \$4.4 million in personnel on the local budget, while STX has maintained around \$4.5 million on the local budget. The operating costs allotments are subdivided into services and supplies STTJ.

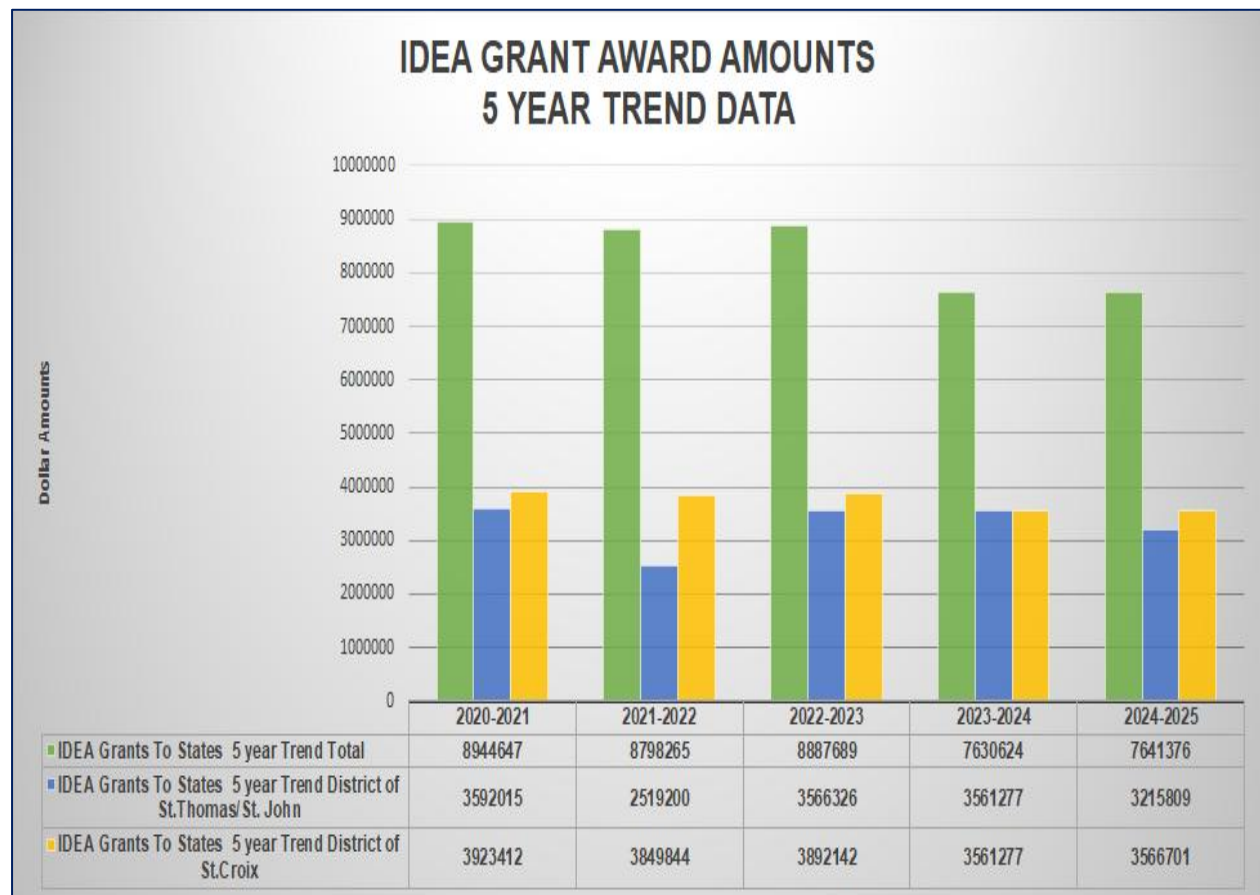
Both District Offices of Special Education (DOSE) personnel costs consume 60% or more of the grant allotment until Federal Fiscal Years 2023 and 2024, notably when the situation became critical in the St. Croix district. Personnel costs have continued to grow, not due to the number of personnel but negotiated salary increases for classified employees. The St. Thomas/ St. John DOSE, even at the highest end of the spectrum, has only been able to utilize 30 to 40% of their allotment towards providing direct student services and programs. Meanwhile, the St. Croix District only had around 20 to 30%. In 2024, the last wave of salary increases completely depleted the St. Croix District allotment, leaving them in the red by \$288,000. In 2024, significant efforts are being made to shift or remove personnel from the St. Croix District - IDEA federal budget to create a more balanced financial situation for the program. The St. Croix District has shifted these funds from personnel to the contracted therapeutic services, hoping to create payment stability considering cash shortages in the local accounts.

Therapeutic service contracts are essential to the operation of the programs, as the services include speech therapists, physical therapists, and teachers for the visually impaired, behavior analysts, and school psychologists. These are all positions that VIDE has been unable to fill for years due to salary limitations, creating a significant human resource challenge in the special education sector. These individuals are contracted at a rate of \$70 per hour and have now increased to \$90 per hour. Local and supplemental funding sources, such as the ARP funds, have supported these services and other contracts. Despite access to additional funding, the programs could not raise enough funds to support all the services, ultimately forgoing one agreement for \$1.7 million (STTJ) and an \$820, 000(STX) agreement. In 2021, both districts received IDEA-ARP funds, which were primarily used to supplement the increased need for behavioral support and school psychologists in the post-COVID-19 return to school. During 2024, both DOSE requested and received support from their respective District ARP funds to procure services. The obvious deficit for each district is often mitigated by the staffing agency's inability to fill and sustain all positions. Therefore, any cost savings from previous encumbrances are used to make payments for subsequent periods, as well as the SOSE provides support from our allotment as much as possible.

The constant shortfall in staffing, especially in school psychologists, has led to the growth of these contracts in hopes of tackling new children/youth identified through the child find process for initial evaluations and reevaluations for existing children/youth who are already receiving services. To aid the child find evaluation component, the districts have turned to short-term contracts with private vendors who can only satisfy half of the

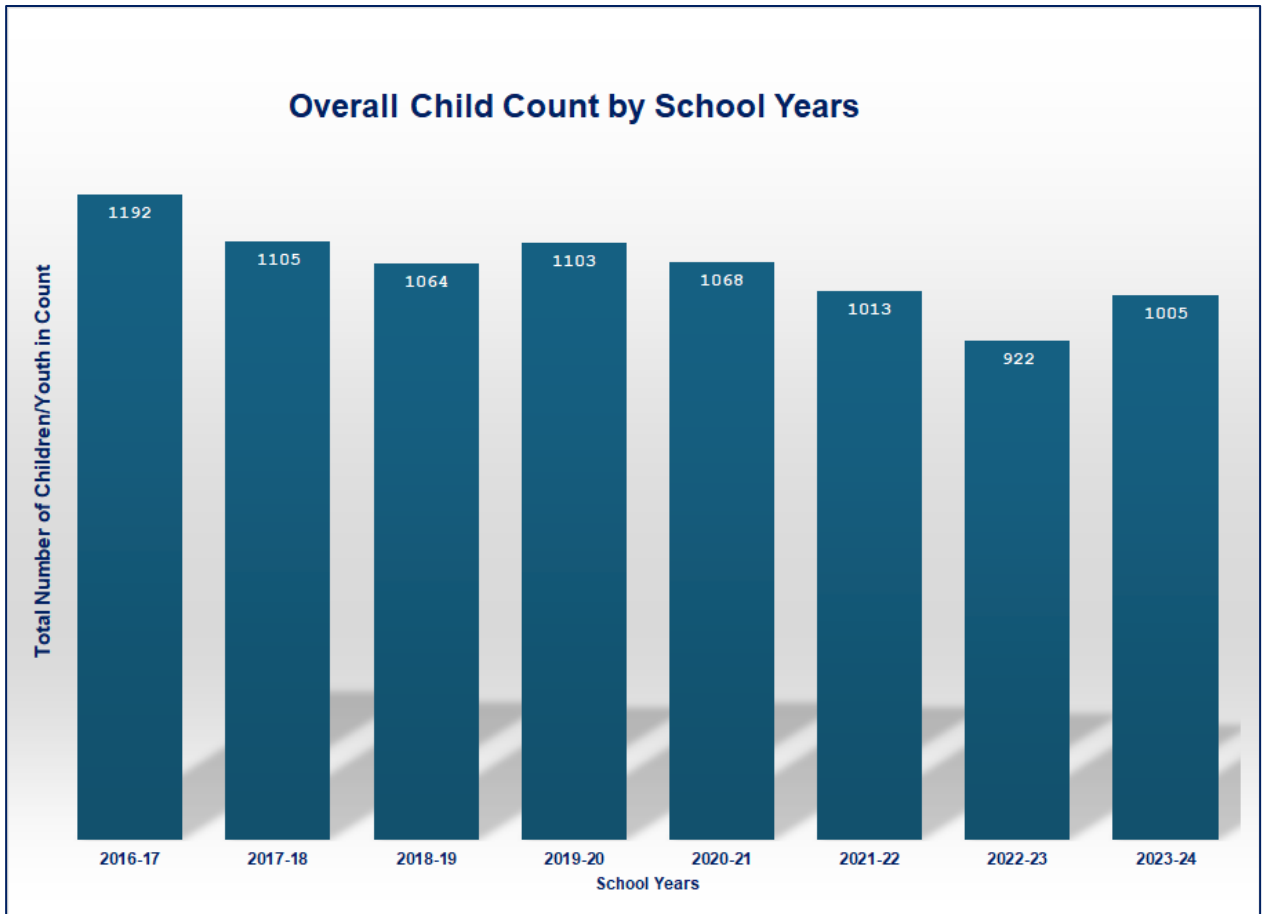
evaluation and implementation of the service process, creating an insurmountable bottleneck of incomplete evaluations. In this school year, the need for services remains critical while funding is gravely restricted. With no local funds being allotted, both DOSE have begun encumbering the FFY 2024 grant to close out this school year, including funding from the SOSE FFY 2023 allotment. Thus, currently, there is no funding available for the books to begin negotiations for the upcoming 2025-2026 school year service needs.

The proceeding section provides a comprehensive summary of Budget and Resource Allocation for Special Education Programs throughout the territory. This data is disaggregated by Districts to include a graphical depiction of funds.



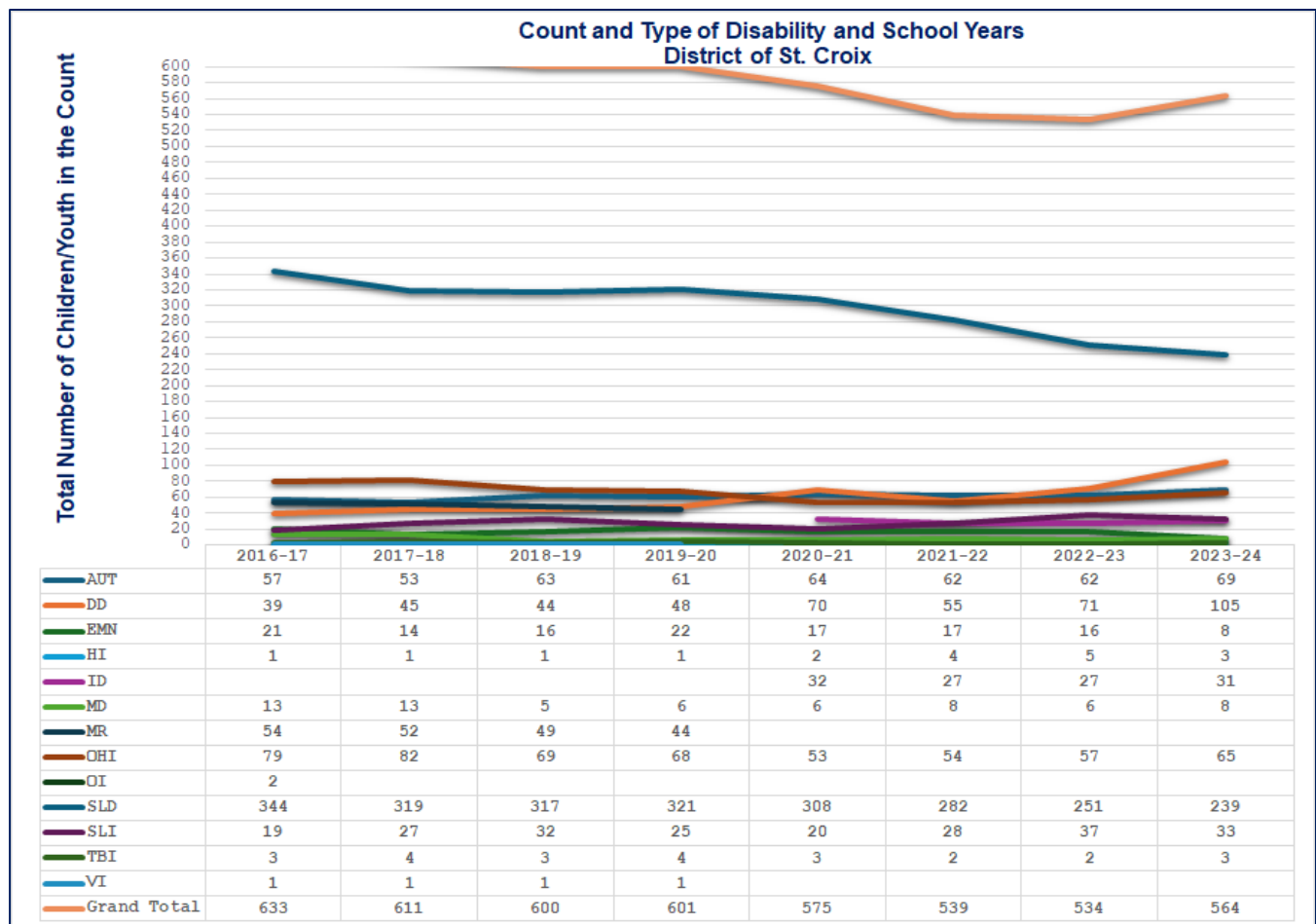
Total Enrollment of Students in Special Education Programs

The graph below provides trend data for the number of children/youths enrolled in special education programs throughout the territory.

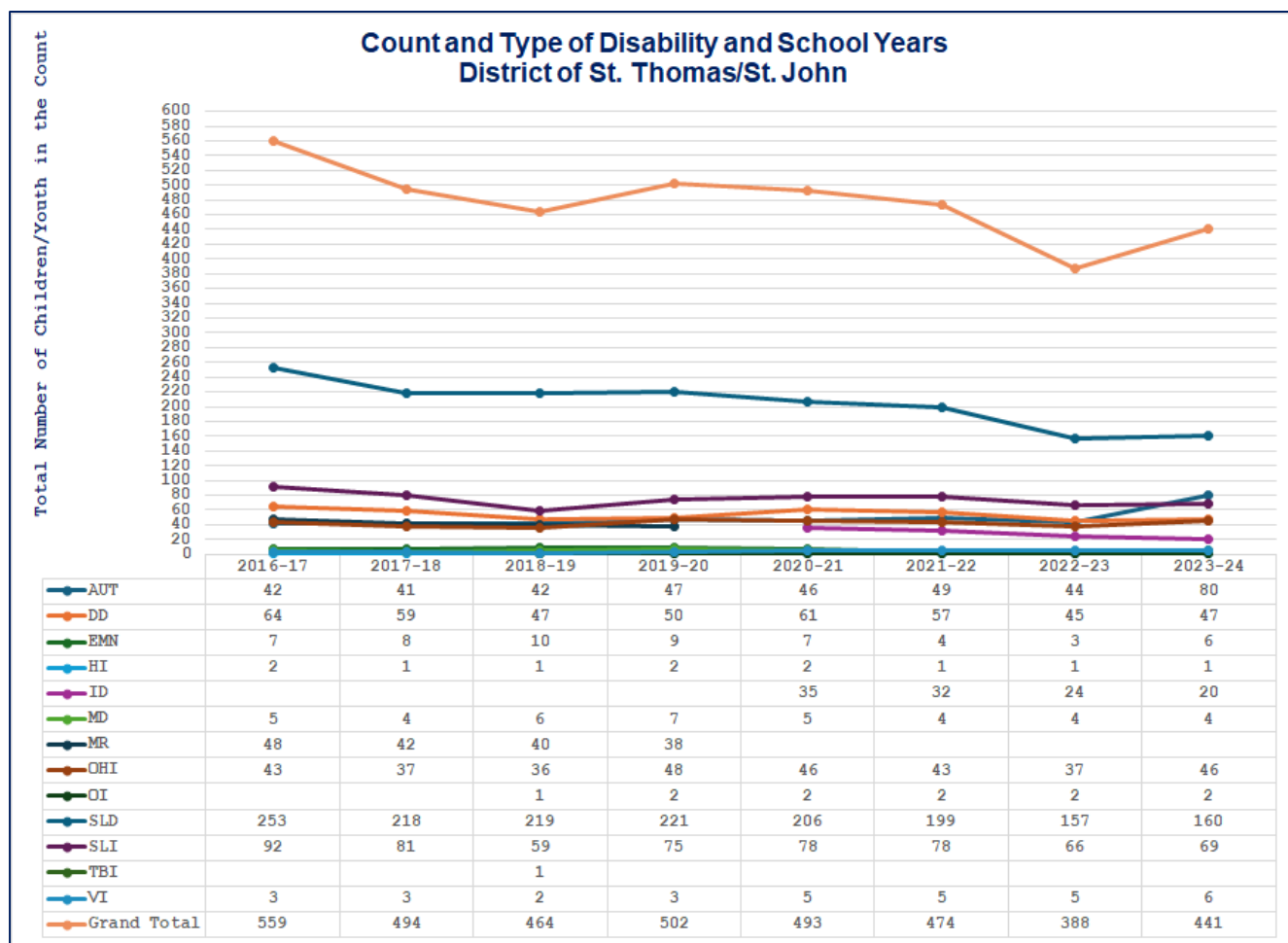


Total Number of Students Diagnosed on the Autistic Spectrum

The graph below provides trend data for the number of children/youths in the various disability categories, to include the Students Diagnosed on the Autistic Spectrum enrolled in special education programs throughout the territory. This number is also disaggregated by District.



AUT-Autism
 DD-Developmentally Delayed
 EMD-Emotional Disturbance
 HI-Hearing Impaired
 ID-Intellectually Disabled
 MD-Multiple Disabilities
 MR- Mental Retardation (**TERM NO LONGER USED**)
 OHI-Other Health Impairments
 OI- Orthopedic Impairment
 SLD-Specific Learning Disabilities
 SLI-Speech and Language Impairment
 TBI- Traumatic Brain Injury
 VI-Visually Impaired



Overview of Trends and Changes Over Recent Years Regarding Special Education Enrollment and Autistic Student Population

Total Enrollment of Students in Special Education Programs

The data table reflects annual Child Count figures reported by the U.S. Virgin Islands to the U.S. Department of Education, covering special education enrollment from the 2016–17 through the 2023–24 school years. In 2016–17, 1,192 students received special education services under an Individualized Education Program (IEP). By 2023–24, that number declined to 1,005—a decrease of 187 students.

In 2016–17, notable figures included 103 students with developmental delays, 122 with other health impairments, and 111 with speech and language impairments. Categories such as emotional disturbance (28 students), multiple disabilities (18), and low-incidence impairments (e.g., hearing, orthopedic, visual, and traumatic brain injury) each had fewer than 10 students and remained consistent across the years.

Over time, developmental delays fluctuated but peaked at 152 in 2023–24. Emotional disturbance declined to just 14 students in 2023–24. Speech and language impairment saw a gradual decrease, and specific learning disabilities declined from their 2016–17 peak to 399 students in 2023–24.

In 2020–21, the category of intellectual disabilities replaced mental retardation. Counts for intellectual disabilities were 67, 59, 51, and 51 from 2020–21 through 2023–24, compared to 102, 94, 89, and 82 under the previous classification from 2016–17 through 2019–20.

Overall, the data reflects shifting trends in disability categories and a gradual reduction in the total number of students receiving special education services, suggesting evolving identification practices and ongoing efforts to support students with disabilities.

Total Number of Students Diagnosed on the Autistic Spectrum

Between 2016 and 2024, the U.S. Virgin Islands experienced a significant rise in the number of students identified with autism. Starting at 99 students in 2016–17, the count dipped slightly to 94 in 2017–18, then steadily increased, reaching 111 in 2021–22. Despite a brief decline to 106 in 2022–23, the number surged to 149 in 2023–24—marking a nearly 50% increase over seven years.

This upward trend reflects improved child find efforts, evaluations, and greater awareness among educators, families, and healthcare professionals. It also signals a growing need for enhanced support systems and educational resources tailored to students with autism.

The State Office of Special Education remains committed to supporting district efforts through targeted professional development, aiming to equip educators with the tools to effectively address the unique needs of students on the autism spectrum. Continued collaboration among parents, schools, healthcare providers, and government agencies is essential to ensure that all students with disabilities receive the services they need to succeed. Through these collective efforts, the USVI can foster a more inclusive and supportive environment for all learners.

Total Enrollment of Students with Section 504 Plans

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 prohibits discrimination based on disability and ensures that students with physical or mental impairments affecting major life activities receive equal access to education through accommodations. Unlike an Individualized Education Program (IEP), which provides specialized instruction under IDEA, a 504 Plan supports access to the general education curriculum without modifying it.

The definition of disability under Section 504 is broader than IDEA's. Students who do not qualify for an IEP may still be eligible for a 504 Plan if they have, have had, or are

perceived to have a disability. Covered impairments include physiological or anatomical conditions affecting major life activities like breathing, speaking, or brain function.

Key differences include:

- **504 Plans** focus on removing barriers and do not require specialized instruction or certified teachers.
- **IEPs** are more intensive, federally funded, and require measurable goals and specialized staff.

A 504 Team—typically including administrators, teachers, counselors, and parents—develops and monitors each plan. The school principal or their designee ensures compliance, while the district 504 Coordinator oversees district-wide adherence and handles grievances.

Parents may challenge decisions by requesting a due process hearing or filing a grievance. If a grievance is found valid, the 504 Coordinator will propose remedies for the Superintendent's approval.

Both IEPs and 504 Plans are legally binding tools to ensure students with disabilities receive the support they need in school.

Feature	Individualized Education Program (IEP)	Section 504 Plan
Governing Law	Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)	Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973
Primary Purpose	Provide Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) tailored to unique needs; focus on specialized instruction and related services for educational progress.	Ensure equal access to education through accommodations and modifications to prevent discrimination.
Eligibility	Specific disabilities listed under IDEA and the disability adversely affects educational performance, requiring specialized instruction.	Physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities (including learning). Broader definition of disability.
Focus	Addressing the educational needs resulting from a	Removing barriers and ensuring equal access to

	disability through specialized instruction.	the general education program.
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Enrollment in 504

District	# of Students with Section 504 Accommodation Plans
St. Croix	13
St. Thomas- St. John	57

504 Plans are Developed and Implemented

Section 504 Plans begins with a request for evaluation (a referral) from anyone (teacher, parent, etc.) who may suspect the student may have a disability that substantially limits one or more life activity, and/or has a record of an impairment. The Section 504 Team/Basic Child Study Team (Grades PK-6) or Student Support Team (Grades 7-12) which consists of teachers, counselors, school administrators, and other parties who may have pertinent information about the student, review data to determine eligibility.

If the student is deemed eligible, a draft 504 Accommodation Plan is developed. The 504 Team meets with the parent(s) to discuss the student's needs and appropriate responses to the identified needs; the 504 Accommodation Plan is finalized.

The school implements the 504 Plan; teachers are provided with a copy of the accommodation(s). The school is responsible for monitoring the services provided and progress of the student to determine the effectiveness of the accommodations provided. The 504 Plan is reviewed annually to determine if any changes may be necessary.

School Counselors and School Nurses play an integral role in supporting students who require 504 accommodations and specialized services. Their responsibilities include:

Monitoring Accommodations:

- Counselors ensure that teachers adhere to the accommodations outlined in each student's 504 plan.
 - Supports the Child Improvement Plan (CIP) meetings held regularly which bring teachers, parents, students, school nurse, and school administrators to review the 504 plan(s), ensuring all accommodations are understood and properly executed in the classroom
 - Monitor classroom implementation by periodically checking in with teachers and students to verify that accommodations such as extended time for assignments, modified seating, or specialized instructions are being applied

- Address compliance issues if students are not receiving the required accommodations, counselors follow up with teachers, provide guidance and escalate concerns when necessary to ensure compliance
- Serve as advocates ensuring students receive equitable access to learning opportunities as they help parents navigate challenges and work with school staff to create a supportive environment
- School nurses ensures that students' health-related needs are addressed in the school setting by:
 - Providing medical insight by offering expertise on student health conditions and how they impact learning, ensuring the necessary accommodations are included in the 504 plan
 - Monitoring Implementing Health Accommodations
 - Participating in 504 Meetings and providing medical recommendations and ensuring compliance with healthcare-related modifications
 - Educating teachers and school staff on student specific medical conditions
 - Coordinating with healthcare providers, therapists and counselors to make sure students receive medical and therapeutic support

Follow-Up & Compliance:

- In cases where students may not be receiving the required accommodations, counselors take proactive steps to follow up with teachers, address concerns, and ensure compliance within the classroom.

Overview of Trends and Changes Over Recent Years Regarding Section 504 Accommodations

The shift to distance learning brought significant challenges in providing appropriate and effective 504 accommodations, especially when those accommodations center around behavior modification. Educators have found it particularly difficult to implement these supports in virtual environments, where student engagement and behavioral cues are harder to observe and manage. In many cases, offering extended time to complete assignments has become the go-to solution, a compromise meant to help students meet goals but one that doesn't fully address individualized behavioral needs.

To manage and streamline accommodations, the district has adopted an electronic platform—**PowerSchool Special Programs**, integrated with the Student Information System (SIS). This system allows educators and administrators to create, monitor, track, and implement 504 Accommodation Plans in a secure, centralized, and efficient way. The platform strengthens our ability to maintain compliance and transparency, while also supporting consistent implementation across schools.

However, a few concerning trends have emerged alongside the increased use of 504 plans. First, a negative stigma continues to surround students who receive accommodations—particularly those related to mental health or behavioral challenges. Some students are unfairly perceived as using these plans as a "crutch," leading to feelings of shame or social isolation.

Additionally, there's growing concern that academic equity is being unintentionally hampered. When accommodations are broadly applied without proper alignment to individual needs, they can disrupt instructional balance and dilute the integrity of academic expectations. Furthermore, inequitable access remains a systemic barrier. Many schools are not fully ADA-compliant, creating obstacles for students with physical disabilities to fully benefit from their accommodations in both virtual and in-person settings.

To move forward, we must balance technological efficiency with empathy and equity. That means continuing to invest in staff training, addressing the root causes of stigma, and pushing for structural upgrades in our schools to ensure every student has fair and dignified access to the support they need.

Corrective Action Plan to Address the Backlog of Evaluations

St. Croix District

The St. Croix District has faced a series of compounding challenges in recent years from the devastating impacts of Hurricanes Irma and Maria to the COVID-19 shutdown, leadership transitions in Special Education, ongoing staffing shortages, and the absence of a dedicated Special Education office. These disruptions have placed tremendous strain on the Division of Special Education. Quite simply, the STX District has struggled to catch a break.

Despite these setbacks, the team continues to push forward. In response to a growing backlog of referrals, the Educational Diagnostic Center (EDC) and Division of Special Education launched the Summer 2024 EDC Evaluations Program. This initiative marked Phase One of the District's proposed "Expedited Special Education Evaluations – SY 2024 Action Plan", aimed at addressing evaluations that had remained outstanding for over 60 days—putting the district back on track with IDEA (2004) compliance.

The program was generously hosted at Ricardo Richards School (RRS), where administrators welcomed the use of their campus for the summer. From June 3 to July 5, 2024, the EDC provided direct services to children/youth and families, offering both assessments and multidisciplinary support, which was often difficult to coordinate during the school year.

To reduce the evaluation burden on the EDC team during the regular academic year, a school psychologist was assigned exclusively to handle reevaluations, with support from SPED teachers—a strategy that helped lighten the load and streamline services.

Looking ahead, the STX District is preparing for a second round of intensive evaluation efforts. In Summer 2025, a fully confirmed EDC team will resume student assessments with the goal of completing 60 full evaluations, including staffing and the development of initial IEPs. This initiative reflects a continued commitment to providing timely, high-quality services to children/youth with disabilities despite ongoing systemic challenges.

St. Thomas-St. John District

The ongoing national shortage of school psychologists continues to significantly affect the St. Thomas-St. John (STTJ) District's ability to meet the needs of students and families. This shortage has disrupted the Child Find process and delayed timely student evaluations, contributing to a growing backlog of referrals requiring urgent attention.

Since 2022, the situation has worsened due to retirements among local school psychologists. Despite continuous recruitment efforts, securing qualified, permanent staff has been challenging. This has increased the burden on remaining personnel and further delayed essential services for students in need of special education support.

At the start of the 2024–2025 school year, the district partnered with two staffing agencies to fill eight vacant psychologist positions, resulting in only one hire—who resigned within two months. However, recent progress has been made. As of March 2025, the district successfully onboarded two bilingual, school-certified psychologists, marking a positive step in expanding evaluation capacity and meeting the diverse needs of students.

To continue addressing the backlog, the district is also exploring virtual evaluation platforms. By adopting innovative, technology-based solutions, STTJ aims to ensure timely, compliant evaluations and uphold students' rights to services under federal law.

Strategies to improve the Delivery and Effectiveness of Support Services

Contracts with Local Agencies

Over the past year, we have collaborated with a local private vendor to help reduce the backlog of student evaluations. This agency has successfully conducted psychological assessments and submitted reports for a limited number of students. While responses to our Requests for Proposals (RFPs) have been minimal, we remain committed to actively promoting these opportunities and pursuing qualified providers to meet this essential need.

Summer Intervention Services

Students will have access to additional intervention services during the summer to address some of the gaps in learning. Sites that will provide services in the summer of 2025 include Ulla F. Muller, Lockhart K-8 School, and the Yvonne Milliner Bowsky School.

Basic Child Study

The Basic Child Study team will also continue to monitor these students on school campuses as they engage in the MTSS process. The core function of the Basic Child Study Team within MTSS is to continuously monitor the progress of students who are receiving targeted interventions (typically at Tier 2 and sometimes Tier 3). We will be able to continue to intervene and provide additional support for these students based on data.

Reduction in the number of referrals for special education evaluations

We have reintroduced the Multi-tiered System of Supports (MTSS) which will help to act as a preventative measure, ensuring that students receive appropriate support within the general education setting. By systematically addressing learning and behavioral challenges early and effectively, MTSS can significantly reduce the number of referrals for special education evaluations, allowing resources to be focused on students with the most significant needs and streamlining the Child Find process.

MTSS is a proven framework that helps schools meet the unique needs of every student. Through MTSS, we:

- Consistently check in on student progress.
- Use data to identify areas where extra support is needed.
- Provide personalized interventions to help students reach their full potential.

Dedicated time for extra support.

School Psychology Program at the University of the Virgin Islands

The STTJ District used ARP funds to offer a Specialist Degree in School Psychology at the University of the Virgin Islands. The five students enrolled are slated to complete the program in May 2026. Participants signed a contract to provide services within the department for seven years upon completion of the program.

In addition, the STX district has created a proposal to outline an internship program designed for the partnership with the University of the Virgin Islands utilizing students pursuing degrees in education, psychology, social work, or related fields. The internship will allow students to earn academic credit while gaining practical, hands-on experience

as Registered Behavioral Technicians (RBTs) within the Division of Special Education. Interns will work under the supervision of experienced Board-Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA) professionals, gaining insight into behavioral interventions, case management, and Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). The program will provide students with exposure to real-world applications of behavioral science, specifically in special education settings.

Additionally, to further address the backlog, the STX district will assign counseling responsibilities to social workers for the first six months of the school year. After this period, these psych-counseling will revert to the school psychologist.

To help address the referral backlog, we will be training SPED teachers to administer specific assessment tools as part of the evaluation process.

Update on the Availability of Sensory Rooms

Sensory environments play in supporting the learning, regulation, and overall development of students with special needs, particularly those diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Sensory rooms provide safe, structured spaces where students can engage in activities that support self-regulation, reduce anxiety, and improve focus—factors that are essential for meaningful engagement in the educational setting.

St. Croix District

St. Croix District has one sensory room at the Juanita Gardine School. We also have two schools, Alfredo Andrews and Pearl B. Larsen School, that have a sensory corner. Our wish is to have more sensory rooms in each school or at least to have a sensory corner.

Last summer, the STX District had a sensory room at Ricardo Richards School during the Extended School Year (ESY) program. Given the rise in emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD), autism spectrum disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), anxiety, or other conditions that affect their sensory processing or emotional state, a sensory room were designed to provide that safe space in a therapeutic environment that fosters sensory regulation, emotional support, and overall well-being for students with sensory processing challenges, developmental delays, or emotional and behavioral needs.

St. Thomas-St. John District

The St. Thomas-St. John District has taken initial steps to establish sensory environments at Lockhart K8 School and Yvonne Bowsky Elementary School where our autism programs are housed. This effort has included the procurement of specialized sensory equipment and furnishings tailored to the unique needs of these students. Unfortunately,

the full implementation of dedicated sensory rooms has been delayed due to space constraints at both campuses. Despite the availability of materials, the current lack of designated rooms has hindered our ability to create comprehensive sensory environments.

In addition, with the assistance of our dedicated educators, Board-Certified Behavior Analysts (BCBAs), and occupational therapists we have established sensory corners within additional classrooms on these campuses. These spaces serve as functional alternatives, allowing students to benefit from sensory support within their daily learning environments.

Our goal for the upcoming school year is to improve the sensory for students in additional classrooms. These spaces will incorporate the most educationally appropriate calming tools, adaptive lighting, tactile objects, and other sensory integration supports.

Supports to Assist Students with Disabilities in Transitioning from High School to Postsecondary Education or the Workforce

St. Croix District

Partnerships and Interagency Collaboration with Department of Labor (DOL) and Department of Human Services (DHS) Vocational Rehabilitation Agency (VOC Rehab).

- Department of Labor (DOL) provides job coaching, resume writing, and interview skills. In addition to assisting with summer to our students
- DHS/Vocational Rehabilitation Agency (VOCRE): A referral is made to DHS Vocational Rehabilitation and a case worker is assigned and invited to the IEP with permission from the parent. If eligible they will receive services whether it's employment, postsecondary education or training
- Career and Technical Education (CTEC) Program: CTEC provides post-secondary vocational training programs in the evenings.
- School-Based Supports: Career Academy Program (CAP), is an at-risk intervention program that will provide job shadowing, internships, work-based learning, community experiences, self-advocacy and life skills classes. This was implemented in the past and is now in the process of being reinstated for the upcoming school year.

St. Thomas-St. John District

St. Thomas-St. John partners with outside agencies—including the Department of Human Services Vocational Rehabilitation Division, the Department of Labor, University of Virgin Islands, Disabilities Rights Center of the Virgin Islands, Virgin Islands Association

for Independent Living, My Brothers Workshop and Raphael O. Wheatley Skills Center—ensure continuity of services and smooth transitions. These partnerships help connect students to vocational rehabilitation services, training programs, and postsecondary accommodations.

Career and Vocational Readiness Programs: We provide students with opportunities to explore career interests through job shadowing, internships, Jobs for American Graduates (JAG) and work-based learning experiences. These experiences help students develop essential workplace skills and gain real-world exposure to employment settings.

Recommended Policy Changes or Additional Resources Needed

Comprehensive Support Plan for Specialized Student Services

1. Incentives for Specialized Personnel

Critical shortage of certified special education teachers, teachers of the Hearing and Vision Impaired, related service providers (e.g., speech-language pathologists, occupational and physical therapists, school social workers), and school psychologists. To address this, we propose:

- **Increased stipends** for special education teachers to improve recruitment and retention.
- **New competitive stipends** to attract and retain qualified related service providers and school psychologists across the district.
- A long-term goal of reducing reliance on contracted service providers through more **competitive salaries** for in-house staff, ensuring continuity of care and cost savings.

2. Professional Development and Capacity Building

To strengthen service fidelity and promote inclusive practices, we recommend dedicated funding for:

- Ongoing, high-quality professional development for general and special education staff.
- Training in evidence-based interventions, differentiated instruction, inclusive classroom strategies, 504 compliance, behavioral support, and data-driven progress monitoring.
- Expansion of **Grow Your Own programs** to build local pipelines into special education and related service careers.

3. Parent Engagement and Advocacy Supports

Empowered parents are essential to successful educational outcomes. We propose:

- Hosting **Parent Resource Fairs** and offering **regular training workshops** to support families of students with disabilities.
- Encouraging **collaboration between families and schools** throughout the IEP and transition process.
- Promoting engagement with community resources to support comprehensive care.

4. Expanded Access to Mental Health & Counseling Services

The evolving role of school counselors must reflect growing student mental health needs. Currently, counselors are primarily tasked with academic and vocational support. We recommend:

- **Expanded training in mental health and wellness** for school counselors.
- A shift toward a **comprehensive counseling model** that includes proactive mental health services, emotional support, and integration into MTSS frameworks.

5. Sensory Rooms

To better support students with sensory needs:

- We propose the **long-term establishment of full-scale sensory rooms** in schools.
- Collaborate with school administrators to **identify and secure spaces** that foster independence, growth, and well-being.

6. Funding Needs

Current funding is insufficient to meet the district's expanding service demands. Key needs include:

- Additional funding to cover contracts for therapists, psychologists, and behavior technicians.
- Support for the **provision of assistive devices** not covered by IDEA, such as mobility aids for home use.

7. Policy Recommendation: Extend Developmental Delay (DD) Eligibility to Age 9

Current policy ends DD eligibility at age 7. We recommend an extension to age 9 to align with national practices and provide more equitable, developmentally appropriate services.

Rationale:

1. **Supports accurate assessment** and avoids premature diagnoses.
2. **Reduces misidentification pressure** while maintaining essential services.
3. **Aligns with over 20 states** that already use age 9 as the cutoff.
4. **Ensures continuity of services** during key early learning years.
5. **Strengthens Child Find and MTSS efforts.**
6. **May reduce long-term special education placements** by improving early intervention outcomes.

8. Behavioral Supports: Structured Alternative Environments

A significant increase in student behavioral challenges has stretched current classroom models. We recommend:

- Establishing or expanding **structured settings outside of traditional classrooms**, supported by trained behavior specialists.
- Emphasizing therapeutic support, small student-to-staff ratios, and social-emotional learning.
- Ensuring **academic continuity** within these programs.
- Partnering with external providers, while recognizing:
- Coral Reef Academy is at **maximum capacity** and incurs high costs.
- Safe and Healthy Schools have limited staffing and **cannot meet current demand.**
- Previous partnerships with the **Virgin Islands Behavioral Services (VIBS)** should be revisited or reestablished.

Workforce Development and Community Engagement Initiatives to Strengthen Special Education Services

Recognizing the importance of developing homegrown talent, the State Office of Special Education partnered with the University of the Virgin Islands in 2020 to provide certification opportunities for paraprofessionals and teachers seeking licensure in special education. This initiative resulted in the certification of eight new special education teachers—four placed in the St. Thomas-St. John District and four in St. Croix.

To expand this effort, we continue to recruit professionals through:

- National and international education job boards
- Social media and professional networks
- Direct outreach and recruitment fairs

Retention Strategies: Mentorship, Training, and Support

To retain qualified staff and improve service delivery:

- Structured mentorship programs are being developed, pairing new hires with veteran educators to provide ongoing support and coaching.
- Manageable caseloads are prioritized to prevent burnout and ensure quality services.
- Dedicated instructional resources and access to evidence-based practices support teaching and intervention.
- All incoming special education teachers and paraprofessionals will attend a 2-day orientation, distinct from general HR onboarding, covering IEPs, inclusive practices, data collection, and communication strategies.

Professional Development

Staff will receive continuous training in:

- Evidence-based instructional strategies
- Compliance and procedural safeguards
- Inclusive classroom practices
- Behavior intervention and progress monitoring

This ensures consistency, confidence, and competence across the district.

Strengthening Parent Engagement and Advocacy

We will continue offering annual workshops for families of students with disabilities, connecting them with special educators, related service providers, and community stakeholders. These events:

- Build a strong network of support
- Promote meaningful parent involvement in educational planning
- Empower families to advocate effectively during IEP and transition processes

Special Education staff will also be encouraged and supported to attend PTA meetings, enhancing:

- Visibility and trust
- Resource sharing

- Representation of exceptional student voices in broader school initiatives

Transition Planning and Postsecondary Success

To prepare students for life after high school, we will:

- Encourage families to support students in applying for scholarships through the Virgin Islands Board of Education and St. Croix Foundation
- Promote vocational training, higher education, and career pathways
- Reinstate the Career Academy Program for at-risk students with exceptionalities, providing hands-on career exploration, life skills training, and community partnerships to support successful transitions

University of the Virgin Islands Internship Program

In response to increasing behavioral challenges:

- We are developing a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with UVI to launch an internship for students in education, psychology, and social work programs.
- Interns will serve as Registered Behavioral Technicians (RBTs) and receive academic credit while gaining supervised, real-world experience.
- Under the direction of Board-Certified Behavior Analysts (BCBAs), interns will engage in:
 - Behavior management
 - Functional assessments
 - IEP implementation and case support

This initiative prepares a new generation of professionals equipped to meet the diverse needs of students with exceptionalities.

Services for Special Education Students and Ways to Improve Workforce Development Opportunities for Students with Disabilities

As students with exceptionalities progress to the secondary level, transition planning and workforce development become essential components of their educational journey. While some vocational and life skills programs are currently in place, the breadth and depth of these offerings must be expanded to address the diverse needs, aspirations, and potential of our students.

To build a more robust system of support, we propose the following:

- Expand access to Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs, ensuring students with disabilities receive the necessary accommodations and modifications to fully participate and benefit from these pathways.

- Establish and strengthen partnerships with local businesses, government entities, and community organizations to create opportunities for:
 - Internships
 - Job shadowing
 - Supported employment experiences
- Enhance individualized transition planning, focusing on each student's strengths, interests, and long-term goals, while aligning services to facilitate their path toward independence.
- Increase availability of life skills programming, job coaching, and assistive technology to promote self-sufficiency, workplace readiness, and confidence in navigating adult responsibilities.
- Address systemic access barriers such as limited transportation, staffing shortages, and insufficient coordination between agencies, which often prevent student participation in meaningful workforce development activities.

Collaboration with stakeholders—including the Department of Human Services' Vocational Rehabilitation Agency, local businesses, nonprofit organizations, and postsecondary institutions—will ensure that students receive relevant real-world experiences, training, mentorship, and support extending beyond the school walls.

This integrated approach not only supports a successful transition into adulthood but also reinforces the value of inclusive practices that empower every student to achieve their fullest potential.

Success Stories or Community Impact Related to Special Education within the Public Schools

St. Croix District

The Division of Special Education continues to create meaningful, real-world opportunities that enrich the lives of students with exceptionalities. These stories of success not only reflect the dedication of our educators and staff but also highlight the power of inclusive practices and community collaboration.

One remarkable example of this impact involves a student from St. Croix Educational Complex High School who aspired from a young age to become a jockey. With the support of his Special Education Teacher and Social Worker, he participated in a trade school tour of **Bluegrass Community and Technical College** in Lexington, Kentucky. During the visit, the group engaged with admissions and financial aid staff, current students, faculty, and the Student Accessibility Services team. A highlight of the tour included the college's **equine training facilities**, where students receive hands-on experience in horse care.

The visit proved transformative. The student was accepted into Bluegrass's Equine Program—making him the first student with exceptionalities from the U.S. Virgin Islands to attend this institution. He will begin coursework this fall and has also secured a summer internship with a professional horse trainer in Kentucky. This achievement demonstrates how thoughtful transition planning and exposure to real-world experiences can open life-changing doors.

At the start of the school year, the Division emphasized the importance of organizing educational field trips for students with exceptionalities, particularly those in self-contained classrooms. These trips have included activities such as:

- Cooking and menu planning
- Grocery shopping
- Withdrawing money from ATMs
- Karaoke and community-based recreation

Each experience provides critical life skills and social learning in real-life contexts—essential components of effective transition planning and increased independence.

The **St. Croix District launched the SPED Gazette**, a newsletter that serves as an engaging and informative resource for educators, families, and stakeholders. It features:

- Student success stories
- Instructional strategies and best practices
- Upcoming events and professional development opportunities
- Resource sharing and community updates

The Gazette fosters greater transparency, celebrates student achievements, and reinforces a sense of unity and purpose across the district.

Recognizing the demands placed on Special Education professionals, the Division hosted a Mental Health Day for staff, offering self-care workshops and stress-reduction strategies in a relaxed and welcoming setting. While Related Service Providers often promote mental wellness for others, this event was a powerful reminder to prioritize personal well-being and foster a supportive workplace culture.

To enhance family engagement, the Division launched a workshop series titled “Dinner and Dialogue with Special Education.” Each session was tailored to specific grade bands—preschool, elementary, junior high, and high school—to ensure relevance and impact.

The series focused on:

- Transition planning and post-secondary opportunities (for high school families)
- Legal rights and advocacy with participation from the Disability Rights Center
- Access to community-based support services
- Building a collaborative support network among educators, families, and related service providers

This initiative reflects our commitment to empowering parents with knowledge, promoting meaningful engagement, and reaffirming that families are our essential partners in every step of a student's journey.

St. Thomas-St. John District

Celebrating Growth and Inclusion: A Year of Success in Our Self-Contained Programs

This school year has been a remarkable journey of growth, inclusion, and collaboration for our self-contained special education programs. Despite the unique behavioral, sensory, and communication challenges our students face, we proudly reflect on the tremendous strides made in providing meaningful, hands-on learning experiences both within and beyond the classroom.

One of the year's highlights was the successful coordination of multiple field trips across several special education classes, with most classes participating in at least two off-campus learning experiences. These outings served as powerful extensions of classroom instruction, fostering social interaction, community engagement, and real-world application of academic skills.

At Lockhart K-8 School, Ms. Daytic's primary class stood out for its creative and impactful initiatives. Through her innovative "Parent Connect" program, parents were invited to the classroom to engage in activities related to their professions. This not only deepened school-home partnerships but also gave students the opportunity to learn about various careers in a familiar and engaging setting. Additionally, Ms. Daytic implemented a "kitchen extension" project, where students actively participated in baking and cooking activities. These lessons offered meaningful, real-life applications of academic concepts such as measurement, sequencing, and time, while also building essential life skills and independence.

Our elementary-level students also took part in several district-wide initiatives, including Breast Cancer Awareness, Black History Month, Read Across America, and Red Ribbon Week. These activities underscored our unwavering commitment to inclusive education,

ensuring that students with disabilities are not only present but meaningfully involved in the full spectrum of school life.

Coordinating off-campus activities for students with complex needs requires careful planning, adaptability, and a deep commitment to student safety and success. These accomplishments would not have been possible without the extraordinary teamwork demonstrated by our dedicated teachers, related service providers, supportive parents, and both school and district administrators. Their collective efforts continue to create inclusive, enriching, and empowering learning environments for our students.

Literacy and Career Exploration After-school Program

January 13, 2025 – March 31, 2025

School	Number of Staff	Number of Students
Ivana Eudora Kean HS	5	12
Bertha Boschulte MS	3	10
Lockhart Elementary School	3	8
Yvonne Bowsky Elementary School	2	12
	Total Students	42

Participating Agencies:

- My Brother's Workshop
- Center for Disability Rights
- Vocational Rehabilitation – DHS

All sites provided homework assistance, remedial reading and writing instruction. With the exception of Lockhart Elementary School, career exploration, and soft job skills were taught on the remaining campuses.

Career Exploration was implemented in primary grades through high school. Soft job skills were taught by Ms. Renata Ajuda, Vocational Rehabilitation counselor to high school students. Ms. Shammi Carr, an advocate from the Center for Disability Rights, and Ms. Chrystie Payne, from My Brother's Workshop, help promote self-awareness and problem-solving skills to students 14 years and older. One day a week all students worked on independent living skills. Students planted vegetables and learned through play daily. Students utilized deep breathing techniques to help self-regulate and self-advocacy to communicate their needs as well as thoughts.

Using I-ready, all students in grades 3 -11 were assessed, at least once in the 4-weeks to determine their present level of performance. This was followed by students completing their prescriptions in I-ready 3 days a week.

The program closed with Transition Fair. While attendance was a challenge at the Saturday fair, all participating agencies were able to meet with the students during the day at the high schools. The staff also utilized the afternoons to help students 14 years and older complete job applications for the Department of Labor and register students with the Department of Vocational Rehabilitation.

Highlights of the Program:

- Students summer job applications submitted to employment agencies
- Alternate programs for students were created (online academic services and extended resource services after-school) and students were successful in their classes.
- Farming and art therapy are very helpful in helping students self-regulate and calm down.
- Career Exploration through playing games, modeling, and research proved helpful in making students understand that their goals are achievable and provide other students ideas as to their future postsecondary ideas.

Addendum A: IDEA Financial Summary

Individuals with Disabilities Education (IDEA) Grant Award Numbers	H0592		H1592		H2592		H3592		H4592	
Federal Fiscal Years	2020-2021		2021-2022		2022-2023		2023-2024		2024-2025	
District	District of St. Thomas/St. John	District of St. Croix	District of St. Thomas/St. John	District of St. Croix	District of St. Thomas/St. John	District of St. Croix	District of St. Thomas/St. John	District of St. Croix	District of St. Thomas/St. John	District of St. Croix
IDEA AWARD	\$ 3,565,498.00	\$ 3,892,970.00	\$ 3,519,200.00	\$ 3,849,844.00	\$ 3,566,326.00	\$ 3,892,142.00	\$ 3,210,480.00	\$ 3,561,277.00	\$ 3,215,808.69	\$ 3,566,701.06
IDEA-ARP			772,464.00	720,351.00						
District-ARP							360,242.35	1,170,791.35	531,727.65	907,655.65
Federal Funding	\$ 3,565,498.00	\$ 3,892,970.00	\$ 4,291,664.00	\$ 4,570,195.00	\$ 3,566,326.00	\$ 3,892,142.00	\$ 3,570,722.35	\$ 4,732,068.35	\$ 3,747,536.34	\$ 4,474,356.71
Local Operating Funding	\$ 866,447.48	\$ 525,461.51	\$ 858,290.00	\$ 954,861.53	\$ 813,725.10	\$ 897,407.18	\$ 811,017.03	\$ 712,786.27		
Total funding	\$ 4,431,945.48	\$ 4,418,431.51	\$ 5,149,954.00	\$ 5,525,056.53	\$ 4,380,051.10	\$ 4,789,549.18	\$ 4,381,739.38	\$ 5,444,854.62	\$ 3,747,536.34	\$ 4,474,356.71
Costs										
Personnel (Federal)	2,489,859.60	3,364,022.04	2,455,463.32	3,232,446.23	2,604,389.42	3,181,765.08	2,595,180.22	2,532,625.00	2,657,528.00	1,355,770.00
Supplies	313,651.49	23,502.64	145,616.10	152,998.02	197,517.89	11,886.03	10,996.26			
Equipment	59,308.95	16,351.47	114,609.10	46,318.53	30,661.23	11,678.75		1,345.15		
Service Contracts*										
Orange tree/ Milestone*	2,475,781.00	1,384,364.80	2,310,451.00	1,293,644.00	2,073,360.00	2,028,960.00	3,559,200.00	3,156,000.00	2,404,800.00	3,283,200.00
Spencer (Canceled)*									1,771,200.00	820,200.00
Coral Reef		563,600.00		563,600.00		563,600.00		563,600.00		683,600.00
Remote Speech										358,560.00
Other Services	47,600.00	51,794.00	47,600.00	519,794.00	47,028.54	51,794.00	-	51,794.00	47,600.00	51,794.00
Total Contracts	2,523,381.00	1,999,758.80	2,358,051.00	2,377,038.00	2,120,388.54	2,644,354.00	3,559,200.00	3,771,394.00	4,223,600.00	5,197,354.00
Operating Costs	5,386,201.04	5,403,634.95	5,073,739.52	5,808,800.78	4,952,957.08	5,849,683.86	6,165,376.48	6,305,364.15	6,881,128.00	6,553,124.00
Ending Balances	(\$954,255.56)	(\$985,203.44)	\$76,214.48	(\$283,744.25)	(\$572,905.98)	(\$1,060,134.68)	(\$1,783,637.10)	(\$860,509.53)	(\$3,133,591.66)	(\$2,078,767.29)
Personnel Percent	0.698320291	0.864127399	0.572147149	0.70728847	0.730272392	0.817484326	0.726794179	0.535204653	0.709140021	0.303008921