

**Testimony of Emmanuella Perez-Cassius**  
Vice Chair, Virgin Islands Board of Education  
On Behalf of Chairman Dr. Kyza A. Callwood

**Regarding Bill No. 36-0049: An Act Establishing the Bureau of School Security**  
**June 17, 2025**

Good Morning, Chairman Kurt A. Vialet, Vice Chair Avery L. Lewis, and esteemed members of the Committee, Senator Kenneth L. Gittens, Senator Dwayne M. DeGraff, Senator Marise C. James, Senator Franklin D. Johnson, and Senator Carla Joseph, other senators present, legislative staff and those viewing via various platforms.

I am Emmanuella Perez-Cassius, Vice Chair of the Virgin Islands Board of Education, honored to present this testimony on behalf of our Chairman, Dr. Kyza A. Callwood, and the members of the Virgin Islands Board of Education. Here present with me is also Winona A. Hendricks, Chair of the board's Curriculum, Instruction and Learning Environment committee. We are grateful for this opportunity to engage with you on Bill No. 36-0049, which proposes establishing a Bureau of School Security.

First, let me acknowledge the heartfelt intent behind this bill, a shared commitment to protect our children which are our greatest treasure. Every one of us here carries a vision of safe schools where every child can thrive without fear. This is a vision worth fighting for. Yet, protecting our children demands wisdom, care, and an approach rooted in evidence and compassion. After careful review, the Virgin Islands Board of Education respectfully opposes Bill No. 36-0049. Let me share why, not out of opposition for its own sake, but out of deep hope for our children's future and the kind of schools we want to build together.

True progress begins with clear intention. This bill, however, lacks a clear roadmap and a strong foundation rooted in the realities of our schools. Without clearly defining the problems and how this Bureau would solve them, we risk creating confusion rather than clarity. Our children deserve focused, intentional solutions not more bureaucracy. Creating a new Bureau carries substantial costs, financial, operational, and human. We must ask ourselves: Will this be the best use of our precious resources? The answer lies in investment in people and support systems proven to work, modernized infrastructure, skilled and caring staff, technology that empowers, and training that equips school personnel with trauma-informed, restorative, and de-escalation techniques. These are the tools that build safe, supportive schools where students feel valued and understood.

In the Virgin Islands, recent Department of Education data shows that over 45% of student disciplinary incidents involve behaviors better addressed through counseling and restorative approaches rather than security enforcement. Further, nearly 30% of our schools report critical staffing shortages in counselors and social workers, limiting their ability to provide emotional and behavioral support. We stand at a crossroads. We can choose to nurture hope and opportunity or to reinforce systems that push children toward a future behind bars. Nationally, the school-to-prison pipeline continues to be a pressing issue. According to the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (2021), students in schools with law enforcement officers are 3 times more likely to be arrested than those without. Black students, who make up roughly 20% of U.S. public school enrollment, represent 40% of school-related arrests nationally. Also, the American Civil Liberties Union's 2017 report, *Bullies in Blue: The*

Origins and Consequences of School Policing, schools with police presence experience significantly higher rates of student arrests for minor misbehavior. The report concludes that increased policing leads to criminalization not safety and exacerbates racial disparities in discipline (ACLU, 2017). In the Virgin Islands, Black students comprise approximately 75% of the student body but represent over 85% of disciplinary referrals involving law enforcement. Similarly, the Justice Policy Institute's 2011 study, *Education Under Arrest: The Case Against Police in Schools*, found that the use of School Resource Officers (SROs) increases student referrals to the juvenile justice system, negatively impacts graduation rates, and fails to improve school safety outcomes. The study advocates for investment in counselors, restorative practices, and mental health services over law enforcement models (Justice Policy Institute, 2011). The Board opposes any approach that attaches criminal labels to youth, instead addressing the root causes of misbehavior through positive behavior supports, restorative practices, and developmentally appropriate interventions.

Our schools must be sanctuaries of fairness and compassion. Yet, evidence shows that increased policing in schools magnifies existing disparities Black students and students with disabilities face harsher discipline and more arrests. For example, U.S. data indicates that students with disabilities are nearly three times more likely to be arrested at school than their non-disabled peers. Locally, disciplinary data echoes this troubling trend, with students with disabilities disproportionately referred to law enforcement and suspended. We must not allow fear to drive policies that deepen injustice. Instead, let us lead with restorative justice fostering understanding, healing, and second chances.

We commend efforts already underway by the Bureau of School Maintenance and the Department of Education. Rather than fracturing responsibility, let us unify around collaborative leadership, such as appointing a Chief of School Security within existing structures to ensure coordination and efficiency.

The Virgin Islands Board of Education has established comprehensive policies designed to enhance school safety and promote a positive educational environment. Effective implementation and adherence to these policies can significantly reduce the necessity for additional bureaucratic structures. Key policies include:

- **Bullying Intervention, Prevention, and Remediation (K-12):** This policy outlines procedures for preventing and addressing bullying, ensuring a safe and supportive school climate for all students.
- **Student Discipline (May 1998):** Provides a framework for managing student behavior through clear guidelines and disciplinary measures, promoting consistency and fairness in addressing infractions.
- **School-Based Comprehensive Emergency Response Plan and Drills (May 2010):** Establishes protocols for emergency preparedness and response, ensuring that schools are equipped to handle various crises effectively.
- **Student Dress Code Uniform Guidelines (July 2022):** Sets standards for student attire to promote a conducive learning environment and reduce distractions or conflicts related to dress.
- **Distance Learning (April 2021):** Provides guidelines for implementing and managing distance learning, ensuring continuity of education in various circumstances.
- **Home Education (December 2015):** Outlines the requirements and procedures for homeschooling, ensuring that students receive a quality education outside the traditional school setting.

By fully enforcing and supporting these existing policies, schools can effectively address safety concerns and student behavior, thereby reducing the need for creating a separate Bureau of School Security.

Incorporating effective school safety strategies from Finland and various U.S. school districts can provide valuable insights into enhancing security within our existing educational framework, without necessitating additional bureaucratic layers. Finland emphasizes a holistic approach to student welfare, integrating health care, mental health services, and social support directly into the educational system. Each school establishes a Student Welfare Committee comprising principals, special education teachers, nurses, psychologists, social workers, and counselors. These committees meet regularly to develop personalized support plans for students, addressing emotional and academic needs. This integrated model ensures that support services are readily accessible, fostering a safe and nurturing environment.

Additionally, Finnish schools are mandated to have up-to-date crisis plans that outline roles and responsibilities during emergencies. These plans are part of the broader student welfare strategy and are developed collaboratively with students, guardians, and staff. Regular training and clear communication protocols are established to ensure preparedness for various crisis situations.

Several U.S. school districts have successfully implemented strategies focusing on mental health support and community involvement to enhance school safety:

- **Rigby, Idaho:** Following a school shooting incident, the district prioritized human-centered strategies, including student-led support groups and active parental involvement through programs like Dads on Duty. They also employed counselors and staff to regularly assess student needs, integrating technology such as anonymous reporting tools to complement these efforts.
- **Marion County, Florida:** The district introduced specially trained gun-detecting dogs on campuses to deter firearms and enhance security. Beyond their security role, these dogs have helped bridge gaps between students and law enforcement, fostering better communication and providing emotional support.
- **California:** The state mandates that all K-12 schools develop and maintain Comprehensive School Safety Plans (CSSPs) to address campus risks and prepare for emergencies. These plans are reviewed and updated annually, emphasizing a proactive approach to school safety.

By adopting similar integrated support systems and proactive safety planning, we can effectively address school safety concerns within our current structures. Leveraging existing policies and fostering community collaboration will create a secure and supportive environment for our students without the need for additional bureaucratic entities.

Esteemed Senators, this is a moment to lead boldly and wisely. Our children look to us not only to keep them safe but to inspire them, to nurture their potential, and to give them every chance to succeed. Together, we can craft policies that heal, protect, and empower policies that reflect our highest ideals and aspirations. Let us reject fear-based responses and instead embrace innovative, evidence-based strategies that uplift all students. Let us invest in their futures through mental health support, community engagement, restorative practices, and education that transforms lives. We honor the spirit behind this bill, but we urge you to oppose it. Let us

instead commit to a future where safety is inseparable from equity, compassion, and opportunity. Our children deserve nothing less.

Thank you for your dedication to this cause and for the privilege of addressing you today. I welcome your questions and look forward to working together to create schools where every Virgin Islands child can flourish.