

VIDE'S TESTIMONY ON BILL NO. 36-0049

An Act establishing the Bureau of School Security

June 17, 2025

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June 11, 2025

Honorable Senator Kurt A. Violet
Chairman, Committee on Education and Workforce Development
36th Legislature of the Virgin Islands
Frits E. Lawaetz Legislative Conference Room
#3022 Estate Golden Rock
Christiansted St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands 00820

Dear Honorable Senator Violet,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on Bill No. 36-0049, which proposes the establishment of the Bureau of School Security within the Virgin Islands Department of Education (VIDE). This critical measure represents a proactive step toward enhancing the safety and well-being of our students, staff, and school communities.

I write to express my support for this bill, which acknowledges the urgent need for a coordinated, professional approach to school security. Establishing a dedicated bureau within VIDE ensures that safety planning, crisis preparedness, and emergency response protocols are centralized, consistent, and responsive to the unique needs of each school district.

Enclosed with this letter is a handbook containing our formal testimony. We appreciate your continued leadership and commitment to creating safe, secure, and supportive learning environments across the Virgin Islands. Your action today moves us closer to a school system grounded in thoughtful planning, proactive safety measures, and an unwavering focus on student success.

Sincerely,

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

Dionne Wells-Hedrington, Ed.D.
Commissioner

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Introduction

Good morning, Committee Chair, Senator Kurt A. Vialet; 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 Bill. 36-0049 - an Act Establishing the Bureau of School Security within the Virgin Islands Department of Education.

Present with me today is Victor Somme III, Assistant Commissioner, Dr. Carla Bastian Knight, Deputy Superintendent, St. Croix District, Irvin Mason Sr., Territorial Director of Disaster Planning and School Security, and Ivan Williams, St. Thomas-St. John School Security Manager.

In light of the escalating concerns around school safety, including incidents of violence, unauthorized campus access, and threats to students and staff well-being, the formation of a centralized School Safety Bureau is a proactive measure. This Bureau will provide a coordinated, standardized approach to safety and emergency preparedness across all schools. It ensures that school environments remain conducive to learning while aligning with national best practices in school safety and risk management. A dedicated bureau also strengthens inter-agency collaboration with law enforcement, health, and emergency management agencies.

Today, we will establish our position on the proposed legislation and offer suggestions for different areas that may be amended to meet the unique needs of the Department of Education. We would like to thank the bill sponsor for this proactive approach to assisting us with our safety concerns. We appreciate the commitment that this body has made to VIDE, and we collaboratively work together to ensure that the safety of all remains a priority.

VIDE Existing Organizational Structure

Currently, the department is broken into districts, each district having its own school monitor cohort with a school security manager that works closely with the monitors to ensure that they have the necessary resources to do their jobs effectively. The monitors also engage in training throughout the school year, and they participate in a retreat at the end of each year. The department has school resource officers assigned to schools, but the Virgin Islands Police Department remains strapped for personnel which leaves our schools without police presence at times. Currently we have 46 monitors in the St. Thomas-St. John district and 63 in the St. Croix district.

Following an internal review of Bill No. 36-0049 and consultation with relevant sister agencies, the Virgin Islands Department of Education (VIDE/the Department) expresses conceptual support for the legislation; however, we remain hesitant due to the following primary concerns:"

- The proposed legislation does not identify funding for the Bureau; as it stands now, the Department does not have any General or Federal Funds to support an entirely new Bureau.

- The Virgin Islands Police Department (VIPD) struggles with police recruitment, even at a starting salary of \$40,953, and we fear that the VIDE would suffer the same fate.
- The need for and intent of the VIDE to continue to professionalize, better train and equip, and expand the current school monitor force.
- There is some evidence to suggest that a Bureau of School Security as a part of the VIDE would be more effective than the use of SROs from VIPD.

Table 1: Data on American School Shootings



Research strongly supports the need for School Resource Officers (SROs) in schools, citing their role in preventing incidents such as students bringing firearms to campus. As of the 2021–22 school year, nearly 45% of U.S. public K–12 schools had SROs present weekly. The primary goals of effective SRO programs include ensuring safe learning environments, offering resources to school staff, building positive relationships with students, addressing youth-related issues, and protecting students. The National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO) promotes a “triad concept” that defines SROs as educators, mentors, and law enforcement officer

As stated previously, there is some evidence to suggest that a Bureau of School Security, as a part of the VIDE, would be more effective than the use of SROs from VIPD. Currently, VIPD employs approximately 15 SROs: seven (7) in the St. Croix district and eight (8) in the St. Thomas-John district. They are assigned primarily at the secondary/high school level. This is not enough, and they are often reassigned to manage crises in the community or are needed to attend to other priorities. None are assigned to any alternative education programs in the Department where students at the highest level of risk and maladaptive behaviors are stationed nor at elementary schools. Bill No. 36-0049 calls for approximately 16 SROs at the high school level (to include the day-adult, CTE and alternative education programs), and 16 at the elementary level for a total of 32 SROs territorially.

Comparison between Traditional Setting and the Bureau

The information below compares internal police force versus traditional policing. It demonstrates how an internal law enforcement entity is more likely to be a part of the solution to school violence and is much more preventative. From this comparison, we can derive possible benefits.

TRADITIONAL POLICING	BUREAU OF SCHOOL SECURITY
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reactive response to 911 calls 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> SRO assigned to/stationed at the school “community”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Incident driven 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Problem oriented
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Minimal school–law enforcement interaction, often characterized by a “us vs. them” mentality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ongoing school–Bureau partnership to address problems of concern to educators, students, and parents
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Police role limited to law enforcement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> SRO role extended beyond law enforcement to include prevention and early intervention activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Police viewed as source of the solution 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Educators, school administrators, students, and parents are active partners in developing solutions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Educators and law enforcement officers reluctant to share information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partners value information sharing as an important problem-solving tool
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Criminal incidents subject to inadequate response; criminal consequences imposed only when incidents reported to police 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consistent responses to incidents are ensured—administrative (policies) and criminal, as appropriate
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Law enforcement presence viewed as indicator of failure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bureau presence viewed as taking a positive, proactive step to create orderly, safe, and secure schools
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Police effectiveness is measured by arrest rates, response times, calls for service, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bureau effectiveness measured by the absence of crime and disorder

There was a mass removal of SROs from schools nationally (at least 50 districts) days after the George Floyd incident in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in 2020. This was due to a growing distrust of the police force. Fortunately, that was not the case in the Virgin Islands. The VIDE and VIPD have a strong, highly respectful, synergistic relationship. Our research also shows that, *“There has...been a resurgence as of June 2022, at least eight districts in states including Virginia, California and New York had reversed course”* to reinstate SROs in schools, Education Week found. There has also been an increase in school districts having their own police department. *“At least 89 school districts in the United States have their own police departments.”* Some school districts, like Miami-Dade, Palm Beach, and Sarasota, have full-fledged police departments, while others use a hybrid model that combines their own officers with other law enforcement agencies. An example of the role of a school district run police department’s responsibility is found in the [Eanes Independent School District Police Department in Texas](#):

- Emergency response to incidents on campus;
- Enforcement of district policies and regulations pertaining to safety and disruption;
- Collaboration with school officials and local law enforcement agencies to coordinate security efforts;
- Providing safety education and training to students, faculty and staff; and
- Development of positive relationships with students and the community to foster trust and open communication.

With respect to Section 110(a) of the proposed legislation, VIDE is in the process of a position title change from “School Monitor” to “School Security Officer.” The Department finds that the title School Security Officer (SSO) better describes the true duties of school monitors who play a crucial role as first responders on school campuses, in maintaining a safe and secure environment during school hours, after school, and during extracurricular activities. They are responsible for monitoring student behavior, enforcing school and Departmental rules, and ensuring the physical security of students, faculty, staff, and visitors. The position of an SSO requires individuals who are physically fit and capable of actively supervising and engaging with students throughout the school day. This title change will allow for the job responsibilities to be effectively reflected by the job title.

As stated earlier, the Department remains very concerned with funding the Bureau as there are no General or Federal funds currently available for supporting this initiative. Sections 1103, 1105, 1106 and 1107 require the hiring of staff and training without identifying funding. With respect to Federal funding for the Bureau, the Department explored obtaining funding via the Security to Avoid Violence in Educational Settings (SAVES) Act. This Federal legislation would redirect federal funds to establish a grant program to enhance school safety at the state and local levels. It would create a new Department of Justice grant program to improve school security and reallocate \$500 million in funding over five (5) years to states to create grants for local K-12 schools and school systems. However, the Department remains uncertain of the intention of the Trump Administration to ensure funding under the SAVES Act.

Conclusion

This legislation is an ambitious and innovative plan to address and help resolve school safety/violence, maladaptive student behaviors, and truancy, as a shared responsibility of students and parents, faculty and staff, pertinent agencies/departments of the Government of the Virgin Islands, and the wider community. However, given the severe financial strains the Department finds itself in, uncertainty of Federal grant funding for this initiative under the Trump administration, and the potential negative impacts to recruitment and hiring at the VIPD, the Department cannot support this legislation at this time.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this proposed legislation and for your time and consideration. We stand prepared to answer any questions.