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**VIRGIN ISLANDS**

**COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION**

**AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT**

**Chairman: The Honorable Kurt Vialet**

**Virgin Islands Police Department**

**St. Thomas, USVI**

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Good day to the Chair, The Honorable Kurt Vialet, members of the Legislature and their staff, colleagues from the Virgin Islands Police Department, and to the listening and viewing audience. My name is Mario M. Brooks, and I have the honor of serving as the Commissioner of Police for the United States Virgin Islands Police Department (VIPD). I am here today to offer testimony regarding Bill No. 36-0049, which proposes the creation of a Bureau of School Security within the Department of Education.

Mr. Chairman, members of the Senate, thank you for the opportunity to speak on this important matter. While I fully support the goal of strengthening school safety for our students, educators, and staff, I believe that the approach outlined in this bill may not be the most practical, efficient, or sustainable path forward.

## **Overview of Existing Models for School Security**

Across the United States, school security is managed through various models, primarily involving either dedicated school police departments or partnerships with local law enforcement agencies.

Some large school districts have established their own police departments. For instance, the New York City Police Department's School Safety Division employs approximately 5,000 School Safety Agents and 200 police officers, making it one of the largest school-based law enforcement agencies in the country. Similarly, the Clark County School District in Nevada has its own police department with 180 sworn officers, providing 24/7 coverage across its schools.

More commonly, school districts form partnerships with local police departments to assign School Resource Officers (SROs). These officers are fully trained and certified through Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST) programs and operate under memorandums of understanding between school districts and police departments. This model, supported by the U.S. Department of Education and the School Safety Advocacy Council, enables schools to access professional law enforcement support without the financial and administrative burden of forming separate departments.

In fact, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reports that nearly 58% of public schools nationwide utilize SROs through such partnerships, compared to less than 10% that operate independent school police departments.

## **Concerns with Establishing a New Bureau**

While the intent of Bill No. 36-0049 is understandable, the creation of a new Bureau of School Security within the Department of Education raises a few concerns. The establishment of a new bureau would require significant financial and administrative resources such as equipment, vehicles, uniforms, office infrastructure and administrative oversight. Based on comparable jurisdictions, startup costs could easily exceed \$5 million, with recurring annual costs in the millions. These are resources that could otherwise be used to enhance existing school safety efforts such as implementing a robust camera monitoring system and support educational programs focused on conflict resolution. Studies published by the ACLU, Brookings Institution, and School Safety Advocacy Council reveal that increasing police presence in schools has not led to significant reductions in school violence or shootings. In fact, it has increased the number of student arrests, often for minor disciplinary infractions. Florida saw a 25% increase in student arrests and an 8% rise in low-level behavioral referrals after expanding its SRO program.

An alternative and potentially more effective approach would be to leverage the existing network of school security monitors. Begin by raising entry standards through background checks, interviews, and psychological screenings and providing robust training in: Conflict resolution, Youth behavioral dynamics, Crisis de-escalation and Gang and drug awareness. Establish a structured hierarchy within the school security framework such as Monitor I, II, and III designations to promote

professionalism, recognition, and accountability. High-performing monitors could also serve as mentors for high-risk students, building rapport and contributing to positive behavioral outcomes.

School monitors who meet the standards and demonstrate a desire for further professional development could be nominated to attend the Virgin Islands Police Department's Auxiliary Officer Program. This type of program is being offered by South Florida State College. Graduates would become POST-certified auxiliary officers, capable of carrying out law enforcement functions under VIPD supervision, while remaining embedded in the school system.

It provides the necessary training and certification for auxiliary officers, who can support law enforcement activities under the supervision of certified officers on the school grounds.

This is our preferred course of action as it provides the Department of Education with sworn law enforcement personnel who also would be versed in the school monitoring system as well. By becoming POST-certified auxiliary officers, these individuals could work in tandem with local law enforcement agencies, more specifically the Virgin Islands Police Department, ensuring a cohesive and coordinated approach to school security.

### **Benefits of the Proposed Alternative**

This approach offers several advantages such as utilizing existing personnel and training programs already in use thereby reducing the need for substantial new

funding allocations. Integrating the school auxiliary officers with other local law enforcement would promote better communication and coordination in responding to incidents. We believe that this model would allow for scalability and adaptability based on the specific needs of each school or district.

### **Conclusion**

While the intent behind BILL NO. 36-0049 is commendable, establishing a new Bureau of School Security may not be the most efficient or effective means to enhance school safety. By investing in the training and certification of existing school security monitors through established auxiliary police programs, we can strengthen our schools' current security infrastructure in a cost-effective and coordinated manner.

I urge the committee to consider this alternative approach and to allocate resources toward programs that integrate existing personnel with local law enforcement agencies, ensuring the safety and well-being of our students and educators. Thank you for your attention and commitment to the safety of our educational institutions. We stand ready to answer any questions that you may have.