

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

Regarding Plans for Summer Repair and Maintenance in Public Schools
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 regarding plans for summer repair and maintenance in public schools.

Shift in Oversight Responsibility

Historically, under Title 17 V.I.C. § 24, the Board had jurisdiction over physical plant inspections and school environmental conditions, coordinating with agencies such as the Departments of Health, Public Works, and Planning and Natural Resources. The Board compiled findings and issued certifications to ensure readiness for each academic year.

However, with the enactment of Act No. 8717 on April 25, 2023, the Legislature officially transferred these responsibilities to the newly created Bureau of School Construction and Maintenance. The Bureau now has exclusive oversight over:

- School facility inspection, repair, and certification
- Construction and modernization planning
- Environmental compliance
- Execution of the 20-Year Master School Construction, Maintenance, and Capital Plan

The Board's School Plants and Facilities Committee lead role was dissolved, and our statutory role has been narrowed to reviewing curriculum-related matters and integrating the Bureau's annual report into our required reporting to the Governor and Legislature.

Meetings with the Bureau and Plan Oversight

As it relates to the Bureau of School Construction and Maintenance, members of the Curriculum, Instruction, and Learning Environment Committee formerly School Plants and Facilities Committee of the Board met with representatives on January 28, 2025, and again on March 25, 2025, to initiate discussions regarding the 20-Year Master Plan. However, it must be noted that:

- No clear expectations or deliverables were set in either meeting; and
- All subsequent meetings have been postponed indefinitely.

Therefore, the Board has not had a formal opportunity to provide meaningful input into the plan's review or implementation process.

While members of the Board may still serve on the Capital Plan Review Panel, this role is advisory only and does not restore any oversight or regulatory authority to the Board.

School Management Accountability Report

The Board remains committed to fulfilling its statutory obligations. I would like to confirm for the record that the School Management Accountability Report, covering the 2024–2025 academic year, was prepared and distributed as of June 15, 2025, in compliance with the mandate outlined in Act No. 8717.

Strengths of Virgin Islands Public Education

Despite systemic challenges, the Virgin Islands public education system demonstrates several key strengths:

- **Inclusive Education:** Our schools strive to meet the needs of diverse learners, including English language learners, students with disabilities, vocational learners, and early childhood populations.
- **Diverse Opportunities:** Students benefit from access to Career and Technical Education, workforce development, military pathways, dual enrollment, AP classes, magnet programs, and early college initiatives.
- **Extracurricular Participation:** Students are actively engaged in competitive, academic, cultural, and athletic activities at the local, national, and international levels.
- **Teacher Effectiveness:** Many teachers demonstrate strong instructional practices, utilizing Promethean boards, evidence-based methods, and student-centered strategies that promote higher-order thinking.
- **Experiential Instruction:** Educators who leverage students' lived experiences through discussion, role-play, and group activities enhance engagement and comprehension.

Weaknesses of Virgin Islands Public Education

However, the School Management Accountability Report also highlights critical weaknesses that demand urgent attention:

- **Standardized Curriculum Disconnect:** While the curriculum is aligned to VISA standards, these are not consistently integrated into daily instruction, classroom visuals, professional development, or parental engagement.
- **Class Size:** Overcrowded classrooms hinder differentiation and targeted intervention. The Board recommends reducing class sizes, especially in early grades, and ensuring the presence of teaching assistants in K–1st grade.
- **Instructional Environment:** Ineffective instruction persists in poorly lit, noisy classrooms with frequent disruptions and limited teacher mobility. Passive lesson delivery is a concern.
- **Management Practices:** Marginal personnel and culturally diverse learners require stronger, evidence-based classroom management strategies.
- **Real-World Application:** Many lessons lack relevance to students' lives, with limited opportunities to connect curriculum to practical, real-world problems.

- **Student Self-Expression:** There is a need to help students articulate their ideas clearly, confidently, and in complete sentences.
- **Overemphasis on Testing:** Standardized assessments dominate the instructional focus, ignoring creative thinking, problem-solving, and other critical competencies.
- **Funding for Intervention Programs:** Delays in replenishing Imprest funds hinder intervention efforts and limit timely resource availability.
- **Parental Involvement:** Engagement remains inconsistent due to communication barriers, cultural gaps, and affordability challenges.
- **Professional Development and Certification:** More targeted training is needed to support teacher certification and performance. Evaluations based solely on certification status may exacerbate retention and morale challenges.

Conclusion

The 2024–2025 School Management Accountability Report presents a realistic and data-informed picture of our education system. It identifies both instructional strengths worth celebrating and systemic challenges that continue to limit student and teacher success. Notably, the report underscores the need for:

- Curriculum alignment and visibility
- Smaller class sizes and more responsive classroom conditions
- Robust professional development and management practices
- Equitable funding models to support student interventions
- Stronger connections between curriculum and real-life skills
- Active efforts to elevate student voice and confidence

To that end, we respectfully request that all education stakeholders—including the Legislature, Department of Education, Board of Education, unions, and community partners review this report in its entirety and provide a formal response that outlines:

- Plans for working group meetings;
- Recommendations for legislative and policy reform;
- And funding priorities that will support quality instruction, responsive services, and a modern educational system for all learners in the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Thank you for your attention and the opportunity to offer this testimony. I welcome your questions and continued partnership as we work to strengthen and elevate public education across the Territory.