

Testimony of the Virgin Islands Board of Education

Before the Committee on Education and Workforce Development regarding, Bill No. 36-0067 An Act amending title 17 Virgin Islands Code, chapter 5 by adding a section 41j requiring the Pledge of Allegiance and the Virgin Islands Motto to be recited at the beginning of each school day in public schools, but additionally provides that students may opt out of the recitation.

Good morning, Chairman and Senator Kurt A. Violet of the 36th Legislature of the Virgin Islands Committee on Education and Workforce Development, other esteemed members of the Committee, legislative staff, fellow stakeholders, and the listening and viewing audiences. I am the St. John At-Large Member, Abigail Hendricks-Cagan representing Dr. Kyza A. Callwood, Chairman of the Virgin Islands Board of Education and our esteemed member, alongside Sandra Bess, Executive Director and Kimberly Gereau, Associate Executive Director, who are in the chambers for additional support. I thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on Bill No. 36-0067 An Act amending title 17 Virgin Islands Code, chapter 5 by adding a section 41j requiring the Pledge of Allegiance and the Virgin Islands Motto to be recited at the beginning of each school day in public schools, but additionally provides that students may opt out of the recitation.

The Virgin Islands Board of Education affirms the importance of fostering civic pride and respect for both our nation and our Territory. We understand the legislative intent to instill discipline, unity, and tradition. However, as stewards of education and protectors of students' rights, we must respectfully oppose the bill as drafted.

First, this proposal creates an undue burden through legislation. The recitation of civic pledges and mottos is not properly suited for codification into law. Matters of daily classroom activity should be guided by school policy and educational practice not legislative mandate. This bill ventures into areas best left to educators and administrators, not legislators, particularly when the outcome can be achieved through encouragement, not compulsion. Second, it is important to note that the Virgin Islands does not have an officially adopted motto in its Code. We ask plainly: *who decided upon this motto, and on what authority?* If a motto is to be recited daily by our children, then it should first be subject to public vetting, legislative adoption, and cultural consensus. Without such legitimacy, requiring its recitation places schools and students in a precarious position. Third, our teachers do not need additional mandates. Teachers are already navigating complex instructional demands, managing classrooms, meeting benchmarks, and striving to close achievement gaps. Adding statutory requirements for daily recitations; however, noble the intent diverts valuable time and focus away from instruction, which is the primary purpose of education. Fourth, we must remember that schools already begin with the Pledge of Allegiance in many cases. To layer another compulsory recitation risks redundancy without clear added value. More importantly, we must always think about the rights of students. The Supreme Court of the United States, in *West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette* (1943), made it clear that no student can be compelled to salute or pledge allegiance against their conscience. This bill, if not carefully constructed, threatens to encroach on these long-protected rights.

The Board urges consideration of the unintended consequences:

- Students who choose not to participate could feel ostracized or pressured.
- Teachers may be left without clear guidance on how to respect those rights, opening schools to legal challenges.
- Daily rote repetition without civic education risks rendering the exercise hollow rather than meaningful.

We must state clearly, we do not oppose patriotism. We do not oppose unity. But legislation should not be used as the mechanism to dictate what is best achieved through education, inspiration, and voluntary commitment. As Aristotle wisely said, *“Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all.”* And as John Dewey reminded us, *“Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself.”*

In closing, the Virgin Islands Board of Education respectfully opposes Bill No. 36-0067. We encourage this body to instead invest in civic education programs, student engagement initiatives, and professional development for teachers that will naturally instill the values of patriotism and unity without infringing upon the rights of our students or burdening our educators with mandates better left outside the legislative chamber.

Thank you for your time and careful consideration.