



COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION & WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

VIRGIN ISLANDS DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION SENATE HEARING TESTIMONY

Bill No. 36-0067

Prepared By :

Dionne Wells-Hedrington, Ed. D
Commissioner

October 22, 2025

Dionne Wells-Hedrington, Ed.D.
Commissioner

GOVERNMENT OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS
**DEPARTMENT OF
EDUCATION**



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October 22, 2025

Honorable Kurt Violet, Chairperson
Committee on Education and Workforce Development
Capitol Building
Post Office Box 1690
St. Thomas, Virgin Islands 00804

Sent electronically via senatorkurtviolet@legvi.org

Dear Senator Kurt Violet,

Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony on the department's position regarding the proposed bills. We have outlined our stance with supporting data, research, case studies, and organizational experiences to substantiate our perspective. We are also prepared to discuss the anticipated benefits or challenges that may result from enactment, including potential costs, required resources, or projected savings.

Enclosed with this letter is our comprehensive handbook, which provides detailed testimony and supporting documentation. We sincerely appreciate your continued support and commitment to addressing the needs of the Virgin Islands Department of Education.

Sincerely,

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

Dionne Wells-Hedrington, Ed.D.
Commissioner

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Introduction

Commissioner’s Statement

Good morning, Chairperson Kurt 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, privileged to serve as the Commissioner of Education for the Virgin Islands. Thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony on the department’s position on the following bill:

- 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 Sponsor: The Honorable Alma Francis Heyliger

Joining me today are members of my leadership team:

- Mr. Victor Somme III, Assistant Commissioner, St. Croix District.
- Dr. Renee Charleswell, Deputy Commissioner of Curriculum and Instruction
- Dr. Stefan Jürgen, Insular Superintendent, St. Thomas-St. John District
- Dr. Carla Bastian-Knight, Insular Superintendent, St. Croix District
- Dr. Merlene Jones, Principal of Lockart K-8 School.

Additional VIDE personnel are on standby to provide detailed insights into specific areas if needed. Again, thank you for your unwavering support and the opportunity to testify today.

VIDE Position on Proposed Bill No. 36-0067

After internal review of the proposed legislation and consultation with several school administrators, the Virgin Islands Department of Education (VIDE/the Department) expresses general **support** for Bill No. 36-0067. Our support of this Bill is in keeping with 47 out of 50 of the United States, which also require the reciting of the Pledge of Allegiance in public schools. It is important to note that “*The 1943 U.S. Supreme Court ruling, West Virginia vs. Barnette, determined that no school or government can compel someone to recite the Pledge of Allegiance or salute the flag,*” therefore the VIDE proposes that clear exemptions for students or staff who wish to opt out be included in this bill.

The Department **posits** that the §41j, the reciting of the Virgin Islands Motto, is in keeping with Title 17, Section 41(c) of the Virgin Islands Code requiring the inclusion of Virgin Islands and Caribbean history in all grades. The Department would also respectfully suggest including The Virgin Islands March as part of public-school morning activities and would augment the inclusion of Virgin Islands History and tradition as stipulated by law.

Data & Research

The table below depicts schools that conduct the singing/playing/recitation of The Star-Spangled Banner, The Virgin Islands March, and/or the Pledge of Allegiance:

ST. THOMAS-ST. JOHN DISTRICT SCHOOL	WHAT	WHEN
Jane E. Tuitt Elementary School	• The Star Spangled Banner • Virgin Islands March	Daily morning routine (teaching anthems to students)
Joseph Gomez Elementary School	• The Star Spangled Banner • Virgin Islands March • Pledge of Allegiance	Daily Morning Assembly
Joseph Sibilly Elementary School	• The Star Spangled Banner • Virgin Islands March • Pledge of Allegiance	Morning Assembly: Monday and Friday
Lockhart K-8 School	None	None
Ulla Muller Elementary School		
Yvonne Milliner-Bowsky	• The Star-Spangled Banner • Virgin Islands March • Pledge of Allegiance	Twice weekly during assembly
Bertha C. Boschulte Middle School	• The Star-Spangled Banner • Virgin Islands March	Morning General Assembly: Tuesday - Friday
Charlotte Amalie High School	Virgin Islands March	Over the intercom daily
Ivanna Eudora Kean High School	• The Star-Spangled Banner • Virgin Islands March • Pledge of Allegiance	Only JROTC
Julius E. Sprauve School	• The Star-Spangled Banner • Virgin Islands March • Pledge of Allegiance	Morning Assembly on Monday, Friday and special occasions
ST. CROIX DISTRICT SCHOOLS	WHAT	WHEN

Alfredo Andrews Elementary School	• The Star-Spangled Banner • Virgin Islands March • Pledge of Allegiance	Daily Morning Assembly
Juanita Gardine PK-8 School	• The Star-Spangled Banner • Virgin Islands March • Pledge of Allegiance	Individual classrooms daily
Pearl B. Larsen PK-8 School	• The Star-Spangled Banner • Virgin Islands March • Pledge of Allegiance	• Monday General Assembly • Tuesday - Friday individual classrooms
Claude O. Markoe Elementary School	• The Star-Spangled Banner • Virgin Islands March • Pledge of Allegiance	Daily Morning Assembly
Lew Muckle Elementary School	• The Star-Spangled Banner • Virgin Islands March • Pledge of Allegiance	Individual classrooms daily
Ricardo Richards Elementary School	• Virgin Islands March • Pledge of Allegiance	Daily Morning Assembly
Eulalie R. Rivera PK-8 School	• The Star-Spangled Banner • Virgin Islands March • Pledge of Allegiance	Daily Assembly
St. Croix Central High School	None	None
St. Croix Educational Complex High School	• The Star-Spangled Banner • Virgin Islands March • Pledge of Allegiance	JROTC only
John H. Woodson Junior High School	None	None
St. Croix Career and Technical Center	None	None

Anticipated Benefit or Adverse Effects

Anticipated Benefits

While the intent of such a policy may be to promote unity, respect, and civic understanding, its implementation must be handled with care to avoid infringing on student rights or alienating those with differing beliefs. Requiring the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance and the Virgin Islands Motto at the beginning of each school day in public schools can promote, encourage, and foster a sense of unity, belonging, and civic identity, particularly within the Virgin Islands community. It also helps establish a routine that sets a positive tone for the school day. More importantly, this practice familiarizes students with territorial symbols and supports an understanding of historical context, government, and democratic principles. Additionally, it provides an opportunity for cultural affirmation, as the Virgin Islands Motto reflects local heritage, pride, and identity unique to the territory.

Adverse Effects

However, the policy may also have adverse effects. Students who choose to opt out may face bullying, peer pressure, or social isolation, and could be unintentionally labeled as “unpatriotic” or disrespectful. In such environments, students may not feel fully free or empowered to exercise their right to opt out. Moreover, some students or families may object to pledging allegiance or reciting mottos on religious, political, or cultural grounds, potentially leading to the marginalization of students from diverse backgrounds.

Required Costs and Resources

The Virgin Islands Department of Education (VIDE) anticipates no new fiscal appropriation, or significant resources will be required to implement the requirements of Bill No. 36-0067. The proposed activities—reciting the Pledge of Allegiance and the Virgin Islands Motto—can be absorbed into the existing framework of the daily school schedule, utilizing existing school public address systems or classroom procedures. The primary resources needed will be administrative and communication-based, requiring staff time to develop and distribute clear, updated policy guidance to all school administrators and personnel. This guidance must ensure consistent implementation while unequivocally protecting the legal rights of students and staff to opt out, thereby mitigating any potential adverse social effects noted above. Any minor needs, such as ensuring all schools have a standardized audio recording of the Virgin Islands March (if the Department’s suggestion to include it is adopted), are anticipated to be negligible and manageable within existing operational budgets.

Conclusion

In closing, I respectfully urge careful consideration of the department's position as outlined in the enclosed testimony. The Virgin Islands Department of Education remains steadfast in its mission to ensure that every decision made ultimately benefits the students, educators, and families we serve. We look forward to working collaboratively with you and your colleagues to advance legislation that strengthens our educational system and supports the long-term success of our territory.

Thank you once again for your leadership and for the opportunity to provide this testimony. My team and I stand ready to answer any questions regarding my testimony and to provide any additional information or clarification as needed.