

Testimony of the Virgin Islands Board of Education

Before the Committee on Education and Workforce Development regarding Bill No 36-0069 An Act amending title 17 Virgin Islands Code, chapter 9, subchapter 1, section 82, subsection (a) by changing the age a child begins kindergarten from five years of age to four years of age.

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 members, 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 36-0069 An Act amending title 17 Virgin Islands Code, chapter 9, subchapter 1, section 82, subsection (a) by changing the age a child begins kindergarten from five years of age to four years of age.

As a body entrusted with both the legal and moral responsibility to safeguard the education of our Territory's children, the Virgin Islands Board of Education appears before you with respect, candor, and deep concern. We are here not to oppose for the sake of opposition, but to ensure that in our collective pursuit of progress, we do not take steps that may unintentionally set our children or our Territory back. Bill No. 36-0069 proposes to amend the Virgin Islands Code to lower the compulsory kindergarten age from five to four. At first glance, this may appear to be a bold step toward expanding early education. But when examined closely, the law already speaks to this matter.

Section 233, Title 17, Chapter 20 of the Virgin Islands Code establishes the framework for a Pre-Kindergarten Program. It charges the Commissioner of Education with setting eligibility rules, ensuring proper teacher-to-child ratios, defining program standards, involving parents, coordinating health screenings, and aligning Pre-K with elementary education. Importantly, this program is voluntary and a recognition that at four years old, children develop at different paces and families must retain the right to choose what is best for their child. Bill 36-0069 conflicts with this statutory framework and risks destabilizing programs that are already carefully regulated by law. The compulsory education law fixes age five as the standard because it balances developmental readiness with educational opportunity. Research and common sense alike confirm that not every four-year-old is ready for the social, emotional, and academic demands of kindergarten. For those born in the later months of the year, September, October, November compulsory enrollment would mean beginning school nearly an entire year before they are developmentally ready. Children are not served by laws that force them into classrooms before they can thrive there. Indeed, the wrong beginning can dampen curiosity, weaken confidence, and strain families.

We must also speak plainly about our workforce and infrastructure. The Territory faces a shortage of qualified early childhood educators, and many who are currently serving are eligible for retirement. Our classrooms are not uniformly equipped for four-year-olds, and our curricula are not designed for this age group. To mandate early kindergarten under these

circumstances would be to build on unsteady ground. And beyond our local resources, we must consider federal partnerships. Head Start, which serves many four-year-olds, ties its funding to very specific populations and outcomes. A compulsory shift would overlap and possibly jeopardize that federal investment, particularly in the current political climate where every dollar is contested. None of this is to deny the value of early childhood education. On the contrary, we affirm it. The evidence is overwhelming that high-quality Pre-K and Head Start programs improve outcomes across a child's lifetime. That is precisely why we advocate for strengthening Pre-Kindergarten and Head Start rather than mandating kindergarten at age four. We encourage you to invest in expanding access, recruiting, and training more teachers, upgrading classrooms, and aligning curriculum across the Pre-K to K transition. This is how we build capacity and honor both the letter and the spirit of our existing laws.

Conclusion

As a Board, we stand in firm opposition to Bill No. 36-0069 in its current form. It conflicts with Section 233, Title 17, Chapter 20, risks federal funding, disregards developmental readiness, and burdens an already strained workforce.

Yet, in offering our opposition, we do not close the door to collaboration. On the contrary, we extend an invitation. Let us together craft policy that honors the wisdom of our laws, protects the well-being of our children, and strengthens not fractures the foundation of early education in the Virgin Islands. As Aristotle once reminded us, *"Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all."* In that spirit, we urge this body to move forward with both wisdom and compassion ensuring that our decisions are not only lawful, but just, not only ambitious, but sustainable.

Progress is not achieved by speed alone but by building wisely, deliberately, and with the child always at the center. That is the motivation we bring to you today, and that is the safe space we hope to create in this chamber: one where truth is spoken, concerns are heard, and solutions are found.

Thank you for your time and consideration.