



COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION & WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

VIRGIN ISLANDS DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION SENATE HEARING TESTIMONY

Bill No. 36-0069

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. 36-0069 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 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. Symra Dee Brown-Gumbs, Deputy Superintendent, St. Thomas/St. John District
- Ms. Andrea Shillingford, Deputy Superintendent, St. Croix District
- Ms. Astrid Hypolite, Deputy Superintendent, St. Thomas/St. John District
- Ms. Jessica John-Baptiste, Deputy 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. 36-0069

After extensive internal review of the proposed legislation and consultation with some of our pertinent sister agencies, the Virgin Islands Department of Education (VIDE/the Department) does not support Bill No. 36-0069 for the following reasons.

Starting kindergarten at four years old is possible, though often younger children benefit from a later start to develop social and emotional maturity, which are crucial for academic success and overall well-being. While early intervention at younger ages can provide short-term benefits for language and literacy skills, delays in starting school, known as [redshirting](#), can offer longer-term advantages in self-regulation and academic performance, particularly in boys, but these benefits can be influenced by family background and may not be a major determinant of long-term success.

Data & Research

Standard factors to consider when a child should begin kindergarten include:

- Individual Child's Readiness: A child's readiness is multifaceted, encompassing academic, social, and emotional preparedness.
- Family and Child Care Experiences: Factors like family background and prior quality childcare experiences can have a more significant impact on a child's long-term success than age of entry alone.
- Demographic Differences: There may be differences in the outcomes of redshirting for boys and girls, with some research suggesting it may be more beneficial for boys.
- Short-Term vs. Long-Term Effects: While some advantages of redshirting are short-term, others, particularly in areas like self-regulation, can be long-lasting, according to the Stanford study.

Additional research findings from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Study on Early Child Care (December 2007) of more than 900 students nationwide “were analyzed to examine the effect of age of entry to kindergarten on children’s functioning in early elementary school. Children’s academic achievement and socioemotional development were measured repeatedly from the age of 54 months through third grade. With family background factors and experience in child care in the first 54 months of life controlled, hierarchical linear modeling (growth curve) analysis revealed that children who entered kindergarten at younger ages had higher (estimated) scores in kindergarten on the Woodcock-Johnson (W-J) Letter-Word Recognition subtest but received lower ratings from kindergarten teachers on Language and Literacy and Mathematical Thinking scales. Furthermore, children who entered kindergarten at older ages evinced greater increases over time on 4 W-J subtests (i.e., Letter-Word Recognition, Applied Problems, Memory for Sentences, Picture Vocabulary) and outperformed children who started kindergarten at younger ages on 2 W-J subtests in 3rd grade (i.e., Applied Problems, Picture Vocabulary).”

Anticipated Benefit or Adverse Effects

BENEFITS OF STARTING SCHOOL @ AGE FOUR	BENEFITS OF A LATER SCHOOL START AGE
<u>Early Academic Exposure:</u> Early learning programs can foster foundational cognitive, social, and emotional skills.	<u>Improved Self-Regulation:</u> Delays in kindergarten enrollment have been linked to significant improvements in self-regulation, which are critical for managing behavior and focus, according to the <u>Stanford Graduate School of Education</u>.
<u>Stronger Early Literacy and Language Skills:</u> Some studies indicate that children who begin preschool at ages 3-4 may show stronger initial literacy and language development, according to Apple Montessori Schools.	<u>Long-Term Academic Gains:</u> Some research suggests that delaying kindergarten entry can lead to higher test scores and better academic outcomes into adolescence, although these effects can be difficult to isolate from other contributing factors.
	<u>Social and Emotional Maturity:</u> Starting kindergarten a year later, a practice known as redshirting, can result in children being more developmentally, socially, and emotionally mature than their peers, according to the Yale School of Medicine.

Required Costs and Resources

Changing the mandatory starting age for Kindergarten (KG) from five years to four years would be contrary to the Territory-wide preschool program mandated by law (Title 17 Virgin Islands Code, Chapter 20 - Pre-Kindergarten Program § 231) and would be detrimental to the Federally funded Head Start Program operated by the Department of Human Services. The potential mass insertion of four-year-old students into public school will put a massive strain on the already burdened infrastructure of the Department's aging elementary schools, prove a tremendous hardship on recruiting sufficient KG teachers given the current national teacher shortage and dual certification requirements (ECE and elementary), and school with outsized classes. The lack of a proposed funding source is another detriment to the adoption of this bill.

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.