



COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION & WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

VIRGIN ISLANDS DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION SENATE HEARING TESTIMONY

Bill No. 36-0080

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. 36-0080 An Act amending title 17 Virgin Islands Code, chapter 5 mandating a daily morning exercise routine for students in all public schools in the Virgin Islands
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. 36-0080

Exercise plays a vital role in a student's overall growth and success. Regular physical activity supports not only physical health, but also improves focus, reduces stress, and strengthens social-emotional well-being. Research consistently shows that students who are active during the school day perform better academically, demonstrate stronger classroom behavior, and build lifelong habits that lead to healthier futures.

The Virgin Islands Department of Education (VIDE) fully recognizes the connection between a healthy body and a healthy mind. Ensuring that our students have dedicated time for daily exercise is a critical part of preparing them to reach their full potential both inside and outside the classroom.

Anticipated Benefit or Adverse Effects

Anticipated Benefits

Regular physical activity is a cornerstone of healthy development. A daily morning exercise routine can help reduce the risk of childhood obesity and prevent related conditions such as diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease, conditions that are increasingly affecting our young population.

Beyond physical health, morning exercise can enhance mental well-being. Students who engage in physical activity at the start of the day often experience improved mood, reduced stress and anxiety, and better concentration. These benefits translate directly to the classroom, where research shows that physical activity is linked to stronger memory, cognitive performance, and classroom behavior, all of which contribute to improved academic outcomes.

Furthermore, daily group exercise can foster a greater sense of community, teamwork, and discipline within our schools. It can promote school spirit and create a more positive learning environment. There is also great potential to incorporate cultural elements such as local music, dance, and traditional movement, which would not only engage students but also foster cultural pride and identity.

By instilling the habit of daily exercise, we are also encouraging students to adopt healthy routines that can last a lifetime.

Considerations and Challenges

That said, we must carefully consider the challenges associated with mandating this program. First, incorporating a daily exercise routine into the school schedule may reduce time available for academic instruction. This may particularly impact schools that are already facing challenges in meeting curriculum goals or standardized benchmarks.

Additionally, not all schools currently have the necessary space, equipment, or trained personnel to implement this routine safely and effectively. These resource disparities could lead to inconsistent implementation across the territory.

Inclusivity is another key concern. We must ensure that students with physical disabilities, chronic illnesses, or other limitations are fully considered in the planning and execution of the program. This includes providing appropriate modifications and ensuring trained supervision to prevent injury.

The tropical climate of the Virgin Islands also presents logistical concerns. High temperatures and humidity, especially during peak morning hours, can make outdoor physical activity uncomfortable or even unsafe without proper hydration, shade, and scheduling adjustments.

Finally, without clear, standardized guidelines and ongoing oversight, schools may implement the program unevenly. This could result in significant variations in student experience and undermine the overall goals of the initiative.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while I strongly support the intent behind mandating daily morning physical exercise in our public schools, its success depends on thoughtful planning, adequate resourcing, and inclusive implementation. I urge this body to engage educators, health professionals, parents, and community members in shaping a program that supports the health and academic success of all students, regardless of ability, location, or background. I extend my sincere gratitude to the members of this body for your commitment to the well-being of our youth and for affording me the opportunity to share these perspectives today.