

**Testimony of the Virgin Islands Board of Education  
Before the Committee on Education and Workforce Development  
Regarding Bill No. 36-0133  
May 6, 2026**

Good morning, Chairman and Senator Kurt A. Vialet 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 Vice-Chair Emmanuella Perez-Cassius appearing on behalf of Dr. Kyza A. Callwood, Chairman of the Virgin Islands Board of Education, and the members of the Board.

The Virgin Islands Board of Education appreciates the opportunity to provide testimony on Bill No. 36-0133, which proposes to amend Title 17, Chapter 10, Section 111(a)(1) to include mental health education and instruction across grades K–12. The Board fully supports the intent of this legislation to ensure that students develop critical mental health awareness, resiliency, and coping skills aligned with the National Health Education Standards.

**Implementation Without Adding Additional Courses**

The Board recommends that mental health education be implemented through integration into existing curricula and school structures rather than by adding additional courses. This approach ensures that students receive meaningful instruction without overextending instructional time or resources.

Schools already have a designated social-emotional learning (SEL) block that provides a structured opportunity to deliver mental health education. This existing component should serve as the primary vehicle for targeted instruction in mental wellness, social connectedness, and coping strategies.

Additionally, while school counselors are currently expected to support students' mental health needs, this responsibility is increasingly challenging due to caseload demands. The student-to-counselor ratio often exceeds the recommendations established by the American School Counselor Association, limiting counselors' ability to provide comprehensive, preventative services to all students. As a result, embedding mental health education within the general instructional program is both necessary and practical to ensure equitable access.

To support effective implementation, the Board recommends the following strategies:

**1. Integration into Existing Subjects:**

Mental health concepts should be embedded into core subject areas such as health, physical education, social studies, and language arts, reinforcing skills such as empathy, problem-solving, stress management, and stigma reduction.

**2. Utilization of the SEL Block:**

The existing SEL block should be leveraged to deliver structured, age-appropriate mental health instruction focused on resiliency, self-esteem, and relationship-building.

**3. Support for School Counselors:**

Counselors should continue to play a critical role by providing expertise, resources, and targeted interventions. However, instruction must not rely solely on counseling staff due to existing caseload constraints.

4. **Professional Development for Educators:**

Teachers should be equipped with training and instructional resources to effectively integrate mental health concepts across disciplines and within the SEL block.

5. **Project- and Activity-Based Learning:**

Schools should incorporate interactive and experiential learning opportunities that promote real-world application of coping skills and positive social behaviors.

6. **Family and Community Engagement:**

Partnerships with families and community organizations will reinforce mental health education and promote a holistic approach to student well-being.

### **Workforce Development and Sustainability**

To ensure long-term success, the Board strongly recommends that the Legislature consider enacting dedicated funding for scholarships and incentives to develop and retain school counselors within the Territory. Expanding the pipeline of qualified counseling professionals is essential to reducing student-to-counselor ratios and strengthening the overall mental health support system in schools.

Investing in scholarships for students pursuing degrees in school counseling, social work, or related fields particularly with service commitments to return to the Territory will help build sustainable capacity and ensure that schools are adequately staffed to meet student needs.

### **Conclusion**

By utilizing the existing SEL block, integrating mental health education across the curriculum, and addressing current workforce limitations through strategic investment, the Virgin Islands can implement this initiative effectively without adding additional courses. This approach ensures that all students benefit from consistent, high-quality mental health instruction while maintaining a balanced and manageable school schedule.

The Board of Education supports the intent of Bill No. 36-0133 and stands ready to assist in developing guidance, training, and resources along with the Virgin Islands Department of Education to ensure successful implementation across all schools in the Territory.