

COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION & WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

VIRGIN ISLANDS
DEPARTMENT OF
EDUCATION



SENATE HEARING TESTIMONY

Redistricting Efforts & School Readiness Initiatives

Prepared By:

Dionne Wells-Hedrington, Ed. D
Commissioner

 **July 14, 2026**



Dionne Wells-Hedrington, Ed.D.
Commissioner

GOVERNMENT OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS
DEPARTMENT OF
EDUCATION



St. Thomas: 1834 Kongens Gade, Charlotte Amalie
St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands 00802-6746

St. Croix: 2133 Hospital Street, Christiansted
St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands 00820-4665

Tel: (340) 774-0100
dionne.wells@vide.vi
www.vide.vi

July 7, 2026

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

Sent electronically via kviolet@legvi.org

Dear Senator Kurt Violet,

Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony before the Committee on Education and Workforce Development regarding school redistricting efforts and school readiness initiatives.

Enclosed for your review is the Department's comprehensive handbook, which includes detailed testimony and supporting documentation. I sincerely appreciate your continued support and commitment to addressing the evolving needs of the Virgin Islands Department of Education and the students we serve.

Sincerely,

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

Dionne Wells-Hedrington, Ed.D.
Commissioner

Table of Contents

Introduction	4
<i>Commissioner's Statement</i>	4
School Redistricting Efforts	5
School Readiness Initiatives	6
St. Croix District	6
St. Thomas/St. John District.....	12
Staffing.....	12
Transportation.....	13
Key Initiatives Implemented in SY 2025–2026.....	13
Conclusion	17

Introduction

Commissioner's Statement

Good morning, Chairman Senator Kurt A. Violet, Vice Chair Senator Avery L. Lewis; other committee members, Senator Marise C. James, Senator Dwayne M. DeGraff, Senator Franklin D. Johnson, Senator Kenneth L. Gittins 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 status update regarding school redistricting efforts and school readiness initiatives.

Joining me today are members of my team:

- Dr. Carla Bastian-Knight, Insular Superintendent – STX District
- Dr. Stefan Jurgens, Insular Superintendent – STTJ District
- Victor Somme III, Assistant Commissioner

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.

School Redistricting Efforts

The St. Croix District has successfully completed all redistricting placements associated with the closure of John H. Woodson Junior High School and the opening of the new Arthur A. Richards PreK-8 School. Following a comprehensive review of enrollment, school capacity, transportation considerations, and student needs, all former John H. Woodson students have been reassigned to schools nearest to their verified residential home of record.

The district utilized a balanced approach throughout the placement process to ensure equitable enrollment across campuses and appropriate classroom capacities districtwide. This effort was designed to maximize the use of available instructional space, reduce transportation burdens on families, and provide students with access to educational opportunities within their communities whenever possible.

While residential attendance boundaries served as the primary basis for student placement, the district also considered exceptional circumstances that warranted individualized review. These considerations included cases involving parents employed at specific school sites when such placements reduced hardships on families and supported student attendance. Additionally, special education placements were carefully reviewed to ensure students continue to receive the services, accommodations, and support necessary to meet their educational needs.

As part of the enrollment process for the new Arthur A. Richards PreK-8 School, the district experienced a limited number of cases in which the eighth-grade enrollment reached maximum capacity. As a result, a small number of students who completed registration during the latter part of May and June were assigned to the next nearest campus, Eulalie R. Rivera PreK-8 School. This action was necessary to maintain appropriate class sizes and ensure compliance with Collective Bargaining Agreements, instructional and safety requirements.

The district will continue to monitor enrollment across all grade levels. Should any grade level at Arthur A. Richards PreK-8 School or any other campus reach maximum capacity, newly registered students may be assigned to the next nearest school with available space. This approach ensures that all students are provided with access to quality educational services while maintaining balanced enrollment and optimal learning environments throughout the district.

The district appreciates the cooperation and patience of families throughout this transition. The completion of the redistricting process positions the St. Croix District to better align student enrollment with community boundaries, balance enrollment across schools, and ensure that all students are served in learning environments best suited to support their academic success.

School Readiness Initiatives

St. Croix District

As we begin the 2026–2027 school year, the St. Croix School District will continue to be guided into Year 2 of a focused leadership plan designed by the Superintendent Bastian-Knight and her leadership team to strengthen teaching, learning, and leadership across all schools in the district. Four strategic pillars: Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), Attendance, Accountability, and Leadership Coaching, serve as the framework for this critically important work. Our efforts are grounded in analysis and insights from recent school report cards and multiple data sources, ensuring that our decisions are intentional, responsive, and student-centered.

The St. Croix School District remains firmly committed to ensuring that standards-based instruction is at the core of teaching and learning in every classroom. To support this commitment, school-based accountability and support systems are driven by a strategic approach that prioritizes Tier 1 instructional practices, continuous improvement, and measurable student success.

Together, these four pillars provide a coherent structure that moves our work from isolated efforts to a unified system of support, ensuring that every initiative is aligned, data-driven, and focused on improving outcomes for all students.

Strategic Pillars Driving Improvement in the St. Croix School District:

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)

The St. Croix District has strengthened its Multi-Tiered Systems of Support through a unified approach between the Divisions of Data & Assessment, Curriculum & Instruction, and Special Education. This work has been centered on ensuring that Tier 1 instruction remains the foundation of student success while systematically addressing areas of need.

Through intentional collaboration, the district has prioritized high-quality, standards-aligned core instruction as the first and most critical layer of support for every student. Targeted interventions are then built upon this foundation, informed by ongoing data analysis and aligned to student needs.

All students must be exposed to strong Tier 1 instruction because it is the only way to guarantee equitable access to grade-level content, eliminate opportunity gaps, and reduce overreliance on intervention systems. When Tier 1 instruction is consistently implemented with fidelity, fewer students require remediation, more students meet and exceed standards, and the system shifts from one of reaction to one of prevention, ensuring that success is not the exception, but the expectation for every child.

Through collaborative MTSS walkthroughs and structured data chats with school leadership and teachers, the district has implemented a consistent process for analyzing student performance, identifying areas of need, and aligning targeted interventions. These efforts have been supported by partnerships with district leadership, curriculum partners, and NAEP, ensuring that feedback cycles are actionable and directly tied to improving classroom instruction.

The use of multiple data sources, including i-Ready, Edmentum, Smarter Balanced interim and summative assessments, and classroom-based data, has enabled the district to refine intervention strategies, personalize learning pathways, and ensure that supports are responsive to the needs of every student. Additionally, districtwide instructional walkthroughs, both scheduled and unannounced, have been used to monitor fidelity implementation of Tier 1 practices and MTSS structures, ensuring consistency across schools.

Attendance

The district has taken a comprehensive approach to student engagement by integrating attendance into its broader system of data-informed decision-making. Attendance data is now examined alongside academic performance, behavior, and perception data to provide a more complete understanding of student needs.

Through data chats, leadership discussions, and family engagement initiatives such as the Parent Retreat, the district has emphasized the importance of consistent attendance as a key driver of student achievement. Parents have been equipped with tools to monitor their child's academic progress and understand school accountability measures, strengthening the home and school partnership.

By embedding attendance into MTSS conversations and school-level planning, the district is shifting toward more proactive and preventative strategies to improve student engagement and reduce absenteeism. To further address districtwide concerns related to tardiness and attendance, new school start times will be implemented for the 2026–2027 school year. Kindergarten through 6th grade schools will operate from 8:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m., while K–8 schools will run from 8:15 a.m. to 3:15 p.m. Our two high schools will maintain their current schedule, beginning at 7:40 a.m. and ending at 2:30 p.m.

Accountability

A strong culture of accountability has been established through the development and implementation of systems that promote transparency, consistency, and data-driven decision-making. A key milestone in this work was the creation of a district-wide Instructional Walkthrough

Tool, non-negotiables, and Tier 1 instructional framework along with a standardized protocol and shared language aligned to the Gradual Release of Responsibility model.

Two full cycles of district walkthroughs were conducted across all non-champion schools, providing detailed insights into instructional practices. The data collected has been used to identify trends, highlight strengths, and determine targeted next steps for schools and the district. This process has been reinforced through the use of a Non-Negotiables Checklist to monitor instructional expectations.

In addition, the district has prioritized the analysis of system-level data, including Smarter Balanced Assessment results and i-Ready diagnostics, to identify gaps, refine pacing guides, and align instructional priorities. These efforts ensure that accountability is not punitive, but rather a mechanism for continuous improvement and informed action.

Leadership Coaching

Leadership development has been a cornerstone of the district's improvement strategy. Through collaborative efforts, principals and assistant principals have received targeted coaching designed to strengthen instructional leadership and data use.

This work has been operationalized through Instructional Leadership Bootcamps, grounded in analysis of walkthrough and assessment data. These sessions have focused on strengthening Tier 1 instruction, deepening understanding of student data, and building content-specific instructional practices across ELA, mathematics, science, and social studies.

Ongoing professional development led by the directors of Data & Assessment and Curriculum & Instruction, school-based support, and leadership coaching cycles have further reinforced this work. Coordinators have provided targeted training in response to school needs, while district leaders have engaged in structured reflection, team development, and strategic planning sessions. Partnerships with organizations such as HMH, i-Ready, Edmentum, NAEP, and our professional development platform known as Professional Learning have enhanced this work by aligning external expertise with district priorities.

Importantly, this approach has emphasized collaboration, leveraging both internal expertise and external partnerships, to build leadership capacity, ensure coherence, and sustain long-term improvement.

Moving Forward

As we look ahead to the upcoming school year, the St. Croix School District will continue to build on this work through the four strategic pillars of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support, Attendance,

Accountability, and Leadership Coaching, ensuring a focused, aligned, and data-driven approach to improving teaching, learning, and student outcomes across all schools.

The St. Croix District proudly reflects on a year of growth, resilience, and progress. While the year was not without challenges and adjustments common across school districts nationwide, what stood out most was the unwavering commitment of our educators, administrators, students, families, and community partners. Together, we remained focused on student achievement and continuous improvement, ensuring that every decision was guided by what is best for our students. Those reflections required us to make hard decisions to yield better results.

The St. Croix District Leadership Team continues its work to strategically right-size our schools through the implementation of our redistricting plan. As part of this effort, we carefully assessed instructional and leadership resources across the district and made intentional staffing shifts to not only fill critical vacancies but also strengthen instructional systems, leadership capacity, and student support structures. These efforts have positioned our schools for greater efficiency, equity, and long-term success as we prepare for the 2026–2027 school year.

Looking ahead, the district remains committed to addressing staffing shortages through ongoing collaboration with the Division of Human Resources. Recruitment and retention efforts will continue to be a top priority as we work to ensure that every classroom is staffed with highly qualified, dedicated educators who are equipped to meet the diverse needs of our students.

As a district, all administrators have recommitted themselves to driving student achievement through a comprehensive approach centered on accountability, instructional excellence, and continuous improvement. This commitment will continue to be reflected through the following actions:

1. **Ensuring Effective Teaching** – School leaders will continue conducting regular classroom walkthroughs, providing actionable feedback, and establishing clear instructional expectations to strengthen teaching and learning.
2. **Utilizing Assessment and Data Analysis** – Administrators and teachers will engage in structured data review cycles, using standards-aligned assessments to monitor student progress and inform instructional decisions.
3. **Strengthening Curriculum Alignment** – District and school leaders will continue curriculum mapping, pacing, and collaborative planning efforts to ensure both vertical and horizontal alignment across all grade levels and content areas.
4. **Supporting Teachers Through Professional Development** – Professional learning opportunities will be tailored to identified needs, emphasizing instructional coaching, best practices, peer collaboration, and evidence-based instructional strategies.

5. Expanding Family and Community Engagement – Schools will continue strengthening partnerships with families through transparent communication, meaningful engagement opportunities, and systems that keep parents informed and connected to student success.

Together, these actions form a cohesive framework designed to advance student achievement and improve outcomes across the district. School Improvement Plans for the 2026–2027 school year have been developed and aligned to these priorities, ensuring that goals and action steps directly support measurable student growth.

The district will continue implementing a tiered system of support through its network of district directors, coordinators, instructional specialists, and school leaders. Our subject-area coordinators will provide comprehensive support across all schools and grade levels while collaborating with one another to ensure consistency in implementation and instructional expectations.

Additionally, the district remains committed to expanding and strengthening early childhood education. Our Pre-K programs, established across all Pre-K through 6th grade and Pre-K through 8th grade campuses, will continue receiving targeted instructional and operational support to ensure our youngest learners are prepared for long-term academic success.

As we prepare for the 2026–2027 school year, our accountability report card data will continue to serve as the foundation for district and school improvement efforts. Data-driven decision-making will remain central to all instructional, operational, and leadership actions. District personnel will continue serving as school liaisons, working closely with principals and leadership teams to analyze performance trends, monitor progress, identify areas requiring targeted intervention, and support the implementation of personalized instructional strategies.

Professional learning will remain a key focus area as we continue building capacity throughout the district. Subject-area coordinators will provide ongoing training for both new and veteran educators in curriculum standards, pacing expectations, resource implementation, and effective instructional practices.

For the 2026–2027 school year, professional development will include:

New Teacher Support

- Classroom management strategies
- Establishing classroom procedures and expectations
- Student engagement techniques
- Building positive classroom communities
- Standards-based lesson planning
- Social-Emotional Learning and cultural responsiveness

These sessions will incorporate practical application through simulations, role-playing, and evidence-based instructional strategies designed to strengthen classroom effectiveness.

Paraprofessional Development

- Evidence-based classroom management techniques
- Effective use of instructional technology
- Collaborative strategies for classroom support and co-teaching

Early Childhood Professional Learning

- Differentiated instruction strategies
- Data analysis and utilization
- Conducting effective data chats
- Data collection and interpretation
- Utilizing ongoing assessments to support flexible grouping

Leadership Development

School administrators will continue participating in a tiered leadership coaching model aligned to the district's four pillars:

- Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)
- Attendance (Students and Staff)
- Accountability Report Card Outcomes
- Leadership Coaching and Development

In addition, all faculty and staff will have access to asynchronous, self-paced learning opportunities through the district's Professional Learning Platform, allowing educators to earn professional development and certification credit while strengthening instructional practice.

As we celebrate the completion of the 2025–2026 school year, we do so with pride in what has been accomplished and optimism for what lies ahead. The St. Croix District remains steadfast in its mission to provide every student with high-quality educational opportunities that prepare them for success in college, career, and life.

The conclusion of this school year is not simply the end of an academic calendar; it is a testament to the resilience, dedication, and collective commitment of our educational community. As we transition into the 2026–2027 school year, we look forward to building upon our successes,

strengthening our systems of support, and continuing our work of igniting innovation and elevating excellence for every student, every day.

St. Thomas/St. John District

Staffing

With separations occurring sporadically, the department has attempted to fill vacancies from the year prior in anticipation of pending vacancies. Paraprofessionals and Substitute Teachers (namely retirees) continue to provide tremendous support to address the absence of elementary and special education teachers as well as secondary teachers in specific subjects. We have made strides towards investing in personnel in critical and hard-to-fill areas by funding cohorts that have produced graduates from the University of the Virgin Islands in the following disciplines: school psychologists (4), counselors (9), librarians (2), and seven teachers who previously served as paraprofessionals. Though this is hopeful, we still rely on international teachers through the J1-visa program, and that process has its own set of challenges. As of July 9, we are still in need of teachers, paraprofessionals, and coordinators.

STTJ District Needs	Vacancies
Elementary	3
CTE	3
Secondary Science	4
Secondary Math	3
Secondary English	3
Social Sciences	3
General Ed. Para	5
Special Ed. Para	14
Computer Teachers	2
Nurses	1
Kitchen Manager	1
Custodians	8

Music	1
Physical Education	2
School Administrators	2
District Coordinators	5
Other (See SPED)	6
Total	66

Transportation

Transportation services in the St. Thomas/St. John District remain the same. School Bus Inc. provides services to the students in the general education population on St. Thomas while Varlack Auto Rentals provides transportation services to the general education population on St. John. VIDE has 7 drivers assigned to transport students with disabilities on St. Thomas and 1 driver for the special education population on St. John. The bus driver on St. John recently retired and a replacement was just hired so there are no current vacancies in this area.

Curriculum Implementation

As a district, we have made a deliberate commitment to strengthening academic outcomes in reading and mathematics. Recognizing the importance of continuous improvement, we proactively sought additional support and partnered with the National Academic Educational Partners (NAEP) to accelerate student success. Together, we have focused our efforts on the three key indicators that drive student achievement: academic performance, academic growth, and attendance. We understand that meaningful and sustainable success depends on progress in all three areas and across all student groups. By aligning our strategies and resources around these priorities, we are building a stronger foundation for district, school, and student achievement.

Key Initiatives Implemented in SY 2025–2026

To support performance improvement across all schools, the Office of Curriculum and Instruction has implemented the following district-wide initiatives during the current school year:

1. Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS)

The district has adopted a full MTSS framework to ensure that every student receives instruction and intervention matched to their level of need.

Targeted intervention services will be provided for students identified through district assessments (i-Ready, Exact Path, Amira, and Read 180). Students will be tiered according to the Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) protocols.

The three-tier structure is defined as follows:

Tier 1: High-quality, standards-aligned core instruction delivered to all students in every classroom. This is the foundation of the district's instructional model.

Tier 2: Targeted, small-group instruction for students who require additional support beyond Tier 1. These interventions are data-driven and time-limited, with progress monitored regularly.

Tier 3: Intensive, individualized interventions for students with significant academic deficits. These interventions are highly structured and require close coordination between classroom teachers, support staff, and families.

2. Positive Behavioral Supports (PBIS)

The district recognizes that academic instruction cannot occur effectively in the absence of a positive school climate. The PBS program is being implemented to address behavioral concerns proactively and to reduce the frequency of classroom disruptions. When students feel safe, respected, and engaged, instructional time is protected and learning outcomes improve.

3. Attendance Improvement Campaign

The district continues to address several barriers that impact student achievement:

-Low and inconsistent attendance rate among elementary, middle, and high school students; rate should be greater than 95%.

- SY 2023-2024 attendance percentage 91.5%
- SY 2024-20245 attendance percentage 90.5%
- SY 20235-2026 attendance percentage 92.9%

All contributed to the days of lost instructional time.

- Social-emotional and behavioral challenges affecting student engagement.
- Need for increased family involvement in student learning and attendance.

These challenges require coordinated action among schools, families, community organizations, and government stakeholders.

Increase district-wide average daily attendance to 95% and reduce chronic absenteeism by at least 20% during the 2026–2027 school year.

Action Strategies

Early Warning Attendance System

Schools will implement a district-wide attendance monitoring framework that identifies students at risk after 3 absences, 5 absences, 10 absences.

Interventions will be initiated immediately through school counselors, social workers, attendance teams, and administrators.

Attendance is treated as a non-negotiable element of school improvement in the district. The data is clear: a student who is chronically absent — missing more than three weeks of school in a year — is at significant academic risk. The district has adopted a vigilant approach to attendance that includes:

- Consistent tracking of attendance data across all schools
- Proactive outreach to families of chronically absent students
- Coordination with school counselors, administrators, and community partners
- Attendance expectations built into school improvement plans

Secondary School Alignment

The district recognizes that continuity of instructional practice cannot stop at the elementary level. High schools and secondary programs are being supported to mirror, as closely as possible, the ELA and math instructional frameworks established in the elementary schools. The goal is to ensure that when a child moves from one grade level to the next — or from one school to another — the instructional experience is coherent, consistent, and rigorous.

Student Registration

Registration & in-district transfers remain on-going. Most schools are at capacity, especially at the elementary level. Until rebuilding efforts actualize, the St. Thomas/St. John District cannot entertain the thought of redistricting as space limitations exist across the district especially for primary grades. No individuals are turned away and there is no waiting list for students to be enrolled.

Leadership Development Initiative in Partnership with National Academic Educational Partners (NAEP)

Recognizing that sustained school improvement begins with strong leadership, the Virgin Islands Department of Education has made leadership development a strategic priority. Through our partnership with National Academic Educational Partners (NAEP), we launched the USVI Leadership Academy, a comprehensive professional learning initiative designed to strengthen the capacity of cabinet members, principals, assistant principals, and district leaders to drive meaningful and measurable school improvement.

The Leadership Academy provides research-based training in visionary leadership, transformational change, strategic planning, communication and collaboration, data-informed decision-making, ethical leadership, emotional intelligence, stakeholder engagement, and continuous professional growth. These competencies are essential to building high-performing schools that are accountable for improving student achievement.

A cornerstone of this initiative is the use of data to inform instructional and operational decisions. Through our partnership with NAEP, school leaders are developing the knowledge and skills necessary to analyze student performance data, identify instructional priorities, and implement evidence-based strategies that directly address the learning gaps identified through national assessments. This work aligns with the Department's commitment to continuous improvement and preparing our schools to demonstrate stronger outcomes on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and other accountability measures.

This investment extends beyond professional development—it is building a sustainable leadership pipeline for the Virgin Islands. By equipping educational leaders with the tools to lead with vision, integrity, resilience, and accountability, we are creating a culture of excellence that strengthens our schools, supports our educators, and ultimately improves outcomes for every student. We are grateful to National Academic Educational Partners for their expertise and partnership in helping to cultivate a new generation of transformational leaders across the Virgin Islands Department of Education.

The schools currently in the Cohort 1 are: Eulalie Rivera, Alfredo Andrews, Claude O. Markoe, Julius Sprauve, Josph Gomez and Ulla F. Muller. Coming online Cohort 2: Bertha C. Boschulte, Lockart K-8th, Bowsky and Lew Muckle. The addition of the schools weas based on the request of the Superintendents. Once the accountability reporting is completed, data will be shared publicly.

Conclusion

In closing, the Virgin Islands Department of Education remains steadfast in its commitment to ensuring that every child enters school ready to learn, thrive, and succeed. Through strong early childhood programs, strategic partnerships, high-quality instruction, and family engagement, we are laying the groundwork for improved student outcomes from the very beginning of a child's educational journey.

The progress we seek cannot be achieved by the Department alone. It requires continued collaboration among the Legislature, our educators, families, community partners, and government agencies that share responsibility for the well-being of our children. Together, we can create an early learning system that provides every child—regardless of background or circumstance—with the opportunity to reach their fullest potential.

This is a defining moment for public education in the Virgin Islands. As we continue transforming our schools and strengthening our educational systems, we remain focused on preparing our youngest learners not only for kindergarten but for lifelong success.

Thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony. The Department stands ready to answer any questions the Committee may have, and we look forward to continuing our partnership as we work together to build a stronger future for the children of the Virgin Islands.