

COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION & WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

★
VIRGIN ISLANDS
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

SENATE TESTIMONY *Special Education Programs*



LEARN
ALL ABILITIES



SUPPORT
EVERY STUDENT



EMPOWER
POTENTIAL



BUILD
INCLUSIVE FUTURES

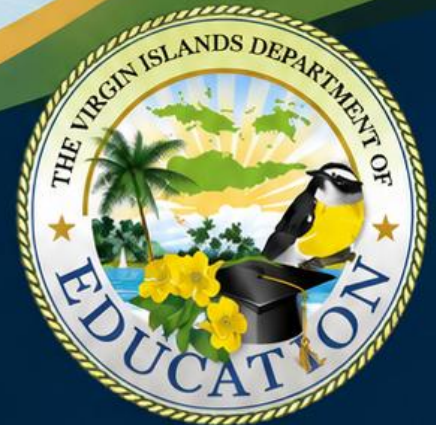


Prepared By:

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

Sent electronically via kvialet@legvi.org

Dear Senator Kurt Vialet,

Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony before the Committee on Education and Workforce Development regarding Special Education Programs territory wide.

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, reading "Dionne Wells-Hedrington".

Dionne Wells-Hedrington, Ed.D.
Commissioner

Table of Contents

Introduction	4
<i>Commissioner's Statement</i>	4
Special Education Programs Status Update(s)	5
What is the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)?	5
St. Croix District	6
Status and adequacy of facilities	6
Training and professional development	7
Current enrollment figures, staffing levels, vacancies, and caseload data.	8
District Evaluation Progress, Goals and Overall Improvement	9
St. Thomas- St. John District	10
Summer Activity.....	12
State Office of Special Education Data.....	13
Compliance with federal and territorial laws, regulations, and requirements	15
Strengthening the Monitoring System.....	15
Commitment to Accountability.....	16
Update on the availability of specialized instructional services, related therapies, and support personnel	16
Eligibility and services provided at the end of the school year	17
Status and outcomes of summer initiatives	17
Efforts to recruit and retain special education teachers, therapists, psychologists, and other service providers.....	18
Student outcomes, programmatic challenges, corrective actions, and planned improvements	18
State Office of Special Education	20
Programmatic Challenges	21
Corrective Actions	21
Planned Improvements.....	22
State-level and district-level breakdown of all federal funding received for special education programs	23
Conclusion	25

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, serving as the Commissioner of the Virgin Islands Department of Education. Thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony on the status update regarding Special Education across the territory.

Joining me today are members of my team:

- Victor Somme III, Assistant Commissioner
- Dr. Renee Charleswell, Deputy Commissioner of Curriculum and Instruction
- Dr. Stefan Jurgen, Insular Superintendent, STTJ District
- Dr. Carla Bastian-Knight, Insular Superintendent, STX District
- Dr. Symra Brown-Gumbs, Deputy Superintendent, STTJ District
- Ms. Andrea Shillingford, Deputy of Superintendents of Schools – STX District
- Ms. Kathleen Merchant, State Director of Special Education
- Dr. Tanya Lockhart, Director of Special Education – STX District

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.

Special Education Programs Status Update(s)

What is the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)?

IDEA is the federal law ensuring that schools serve students with disabilities. Under IDEA, schools are required to provide special education services to students through their Individual Education Plans (IEPs). Additionally, IDEA requires schools to guarantee each student a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE).

The law states: “Disability is a natural part of the human experience and in no way diminishes the rights of individuals to participate in or contribute to society.” Providing education, according to IDEA, and improving the results for kids with disabilities is part of equal opportunity and full participation in society for people with disabilities.

IDEA was reauthorized in 2004 and amended through the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015 (Public Law 114-95).

Disability is defined according to IDEA, is when a child has one of 13 qualifying disabilities and that it impacts their ability to progress in school and requires specialized instruction or services in school. The 13 disability categories that kids can be eligible under are:

- Autism
- Speech/language impairment
- Specific learning disability
- Orthopedic impairment
- Other health impairments
- Multiple disabilities
- Intellectual disability
- Visual impairment
- Emotional disability
- Deafness
- Deaf-blindness (both)
- Traumatic brain injury
- Developmental delay

Not all children with disabilities are eligible for special education services. After a child is referred and evaluated, if they have a disability and, because of their disability, need special education support to benefit from general education and make progress, then they are eligible for special education services.

St. Croix District

Status and adequacy of facilities

In the aftermath of the 2017 hurricanes, securing and maintaining adequate facilities has remained a significant challenge across the district. The Division of Special Education Office is currently housed at La Grande Princesse on St. Croix. While the facility has received limited improvements over the past two years, including routine maintenance, installation of industrial air-conditioning units, and a recent deep cleaning, the building continues to present challenges that impact daily operations. Facility concerns are routinely communicated to the Bureau of School Construction and Maintenance and are addressed as funding and resources become available. Despite these ongoing challenges, the Division of Special Education staff remain steadfast in their commitment to providing high-quality services and support to students and families.

The Special Education Office continues to make steady progress toward full operational capacity. While significant improvements have been made over the past year, including the restoration of internet connectivity in portions of the facility by Virgin Islands Department of Education Information Technology personnel, some infrastructure and technology needs remain. Additional furnishings and equipment, such as desks, chairs, and computers, are still being acquired and installed to fully support daily operations, including service documentation, Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings, parent conferences, and other essential functions. In addition, several areas of the facility continue to experience network connectivity challenges that require specialized contractor support to fully resolve.

During this transition period, related service providers continue to serve students from their assigned school sites, utilizing available spaces to complete documentation, meet with families, and conduct student evaluations and assessments. While staff have remained committed to ensuring continuity of services, these temporary arrangements can vary by location and may not always provide the optimal level of privacy, confidentiality, and professional workspace that a centralized office environment offers.

Historically, the Special Education Office served as a central hub for staff collaboration, parent engagement, professional development, and confidential meetings. The Division remains focused on restoring the facility to full functionality so that it can once again serve as a comprehensive resource center for students, families, and staff throughout the district.

Special education services are delivered across ten schools through 41 Resource and Self-Contained classrooms, including 24 Resource/Extended Resource classrooms and 17 Self-Contained classrooms. These programs currently serve 535 students against a rated capacity of 618. While overall capacity remains sufficient districtwide, several campuses including Eulalie R. Rivera PreK-8 School, Lew Muckle K-6 School, and St. Croix Educational Complex High School are operating above their intended capacity, placing additional strain on instructional and support spaces. These capacity challenges underscore the ongoing need for facility improvements and strategic space planning to ensure students with disabilities receive services in environments that are safe, appropriate, and conducive to learning.

Training and professional development

In addition to the DirectStep training provided through the State Office of Special Education, the St. Croix District continues to invest in comprehensive professional development opportunities to ensure Special Education teachers, paraprofessionals, and related service providers are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and resources necessary to effectively support students with disabilities.

To maintain consistency and strengthen instructional practices, Special Education Supervisors are required to provide a minimum of three formal professional development sessions annually for teachers and paraprofessionals. The Division of Special Education also conducts orientation sessions for all newly hired teachers and paraprofessionals to ensure staff are informed of district procedures, compliance requirements, available resources, and best practices for serving students with disabilities.

Professional development efforts have been strengthened through several targeted initiatives, including:

- Ongoing coaching, consultation, and technical assistance provided by the district's Board-Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA).
- A collaborative partnership with Tropical Behavior Solutions to enhance behavioral support services and intervention strategies.
- Interactive workshops for self-contained classroom staff focused on communication strategies, positive behavior supports, sensory regulation, de-escalation techniques, and inclusive classroom practices.
- Training sessions for Special Education teachers on Individualized Education Program (IEP) development, compliance requirements, and Triennial Review procedures to ensure accurate and timely documentation.
- Continued guidance and support related to instructional accommodation, modifications, progress monitoring, and data-driven decision-making.

Recognizing that meaningful family engagement is critical to student success, the Division of Special Education has also expanded its parent outreach and training efforts through the launch of **“Dinner with SPED,”** a parent education series designed to meet the unique needs of preschool, elementary, junior high, and high school families. These sessions provide parents with practical information, resources, and opportunities to engage directly with educational and community partners.

Topics and presentations have included:

- Presentations from the University of the Virgin Islands on postsecondary opportunities and available support services.
- Guidance from high school counselors regarding graduation requirements, diploma pathways, and transition planning.
- Presentations by the Disability Rights Center addressing parental rights under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), procedural safeguards, and the use of special powers of attorney.
- Demonstrations of practical, at-home strategies using common household items to support speech therapy, occupational therapy, physical therapy, and differentiated learning activities for younger students.
- Discussions focused on transition services, self-advocacy, independent living skills, and community resources available to students and families.

These professional development and family engagement initiatives reflect the Division’s commitment to continuous improvement, staff capacity building, and fostering strong partnerships with families. Through ongoing training and collaboration, the St. Croix District remains focused on ensuring that educators, support personnel, and parents are well-informed and equipped to support the academic, behavioral, social, and emotional success of students with disabilities while upholding the requirements and protections afforded under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

Current enrollment figures, staffing levels, vacancies, and caseload data.

The St. Croix District currently serves 685 students with disabilities across the continuum of services. Of the 41 SPED teaching positions, 33 are filled and 8 remain vacant across six schools: Central High (2), Pearl B. Larsen (2), and one each at Alfredo Andrews, Eulalie Rivera, Juanita Gardine, and Arthur A. Richards. Several classrooms are operating above their rated capacity including Arthur A. Richards K–8 (128%), Lew Muckle K–6 (121%), and the St. Croix Educational Complex (103%) placing additional demand on existing staff.

In partnership with the Division of Human Resources, the district has extended offers to six (6) International Special Education Teachers, all of whom have accepted. These candidates are currently awaiting J-1 visa issuance by the U.S. Department of State, a federal timeline outside the

district's control. Once cleared, these hires will fill six of the eight current vacancies; the remaining positions, together with additional positions generated by ongoing evaluations, will require continued recruitment as funded positions become available.

Paraprofessional support represents a further critical gap. The district's staffing records document seven or more paraprofessional vacancies, with additional needs at Central High and the St. Croix Educational Complex, where several Self-Contained and Extended Resource classes are operating above the required student-to-staff ratio. At present, there are no funded special education paraprofessional positions available in the district. Child Count is expected to increase as summer evaluations are finalized.

District Evaluation Progress, Goals and Overall Improvement

The St. Croix District has made significant, sustained progress in reducing its Special Education evaluation backlog. In 2024, 403 students were awaiting evaluation; that backlog has since been reduced to 119 students, a reduction of approximately 70 percent, or 284 students evaluated. This progress reflects a coordinated, multi-year effort by the district's evaluation team and school-based staff.

A central driver of this progress has been the summer testing initiative, an evaluation effort that is separate and distinct from the Extended School Year services noted above: the summer testing initiative evaluates students in order to identify and qualify those who may be eligible for special education, whereas Extended School Year provides continuing services to students already determined eligible. Under this initiative, 60 students were scheduled for evaluation during summer 2026, and initial IEPs were developed for those who were evaluated and found eligible for services.

The summer testing initiative was made possible by a separate allocation of \$196,238 appropriated under Bill 36-0309 specifically to reduce the evaluation backlog. Of that allocation, an estimated \$137,160 was required for evaluation-team personnel, leaving a balance of approximately \$59,078. Completing evaluations for the 119 students who remain in the backlog is projected to cost approximately \$272,034, which, measured against the remaining balance, represents a shortfall of approximately \$212,956 for evaluations alone. This figure does not include the cost of the instructional and paraprofessional positions that will be required to serve the students who qualify as a result of these evaluations.

The St. Croix district's immediate goal is to complete evaluations for the 119 students who remain in the backlog and to ensure that every eligible student is placed in an appropriate setting with a qualified teacher and the paraprofessional support required by their IEP. As summer testing and placement are finalized, the district anticipates that additional students will qualify for services, which will in turn increase the district's Child Count and generate new service and staffing obligations. Sustaining this progress, and ensuring full compliance with IDEA, depends on

continued investment in both evaluation capacity and instructional staffing. The demand for services continues to rise. All self-contained classrooms are at maximum capacity. The standard ratio for self-contained settings is 10:1:1 (10 students, 1 SPED teacher, 1 paraprofessional). Several classrooms now serve 13 to 14 students, exceeding recommended limits, however because of the needs of our students, our employees continue to show up and provide quality instruction to our students.

Additional classrooms, teachers, and paraprofessionals are needed to meet federal requirements, reduce service gaps, and ensure students receive the individualized support and services to which they are entitled.

St. Thomas- St. John District

During the 2025/2026 SY, the district Special Education Office was relocated from the Leonard Dober Complex due to complaints of mold and issues with air quality. In an effort to provide a safer work environment, SPED supervisors and office staff were relocated to the Tutu Park mall. The Tutu Park Mall location is an open room with cubicles assigned to personnel.

STTJ provides basic PD during back-to-school sessions and PD on an as-needed basis on classroom instruction strategies and other pedagogical needs.

-August 2025 – Districtwide professional learning to include SPED and general ED teachers emphasizing innovation, instructional excellence, collaboration, and equitable practices.

-District PD Day (Feb. 2026) Compliance for SPED Teachers and Paraprofessionals. Best Practices for SPED Teachers; Best Practices for SPED Paraprofessional using the MTSS process.

-Administrators Meeting and PD (May 2026) SPED Platform for Administrators & Counselors; SPED Platform for Secondary Teachers.

Special Education Vacancies & Case Load Assignment

Special Education Teachers	
Vacancies	Number
Paraprofessionals	12
Early Childhood	1
Co-teach resource Grade 7	2
Co-teach resource Grade 6	1
Co-teach resource (Elementary)	1

Mis 4	1
Total vacancies	18

Current Position	Current Assignment/Responsibilities	VIDE/Contracted (Orange Tree)
Coordinator Educational Diagnostic Center - Rosemarie Callwood	Coordinate the scheduling of evaluations/reevaluations upon receipt of completed referrals from schools and parental consent	VIDE
Supervisor – Ellen Lewis	Responsible for ensuring that the Sped Teachers at the Middle & High School (BCB/IEKHS)/Residential Services remain compliant and that students receive the services as identified in the IEPs (Not hands-on in the evaluation process)	VIDE
Supervisor – Sharon Boyd	Responsible for ensuring that the SPED Teachers in grades 3rd thru 5th remain compliant and that students receive the services as identified in the IEPs (Not hands-on in the evaluation process)	VIDE
Supervisor – Jeanette Tajores-Acuna	Responsible for ensuring that the Sped Teachers in grades Pre K thru 2nd remain compliant and that students receive the services as identified in the IEPs (Not hands-on in the evaluation process)	VIDE
Supervisor – Cherrie Saliot-Warner	Responsible for ensuring that the Sped Teachers at the Middle & High School/– Lockhart grades 6 th thru 8 th /CAHS remain compliant and that students receive the services as identified in the IEPs (Not hands-on in the evaluation process)	VIDE
		Orange Tree Contractor

School Psychologists	Evaluate and determine special education eligibility (initial evaluations, observations, reevaluations, etc.)	2 contracted (2025-2026)
Speech-Language Pathologists	Evaluate and provide therapeutic speech language services to eligible students	3 VIDE 2 contracted (2025-2026)
Occupational Therapists	Evaluate and provide occupational therapy services to eligible students	2 (contracted 2025-2026)
Behavioral Specialists (Board Certified Behavioral Analysts)	Evaluate, develop BIPs, train staff on behavior strategies, etc.	1 BCBA 4 RBTs (all contracted 2025-2026)
Evaluation Coordinators	N/A	None
Data Specialist	N/A	None
Physical Therapists	Evaluate and provide physical therapy services to eligible students	1 (contracted 2025-2026)

Summer Activity

Extended School Year was offered to those who needed compensatory time to build skills and provide services for four weeks. No assessment, evaluations or re-evaluations were conducted during summer of 2026. At present, **44 initial evaluations** have been started but remain incomplete. While the assistance provided by our recent specialist candidate interns has contributed positively to the evaluation process, these cases have not yet been finalized due to limitations in available qualified personnel, supervision requirements, documentation, scheduling, and other operational constraints. Completing these evaluations remains a priority, as delays can postpone students' access to appropriate special education services and supports. Additionally, there are **120 re-evaluations** that are currently out of compliance with SPED requirements.

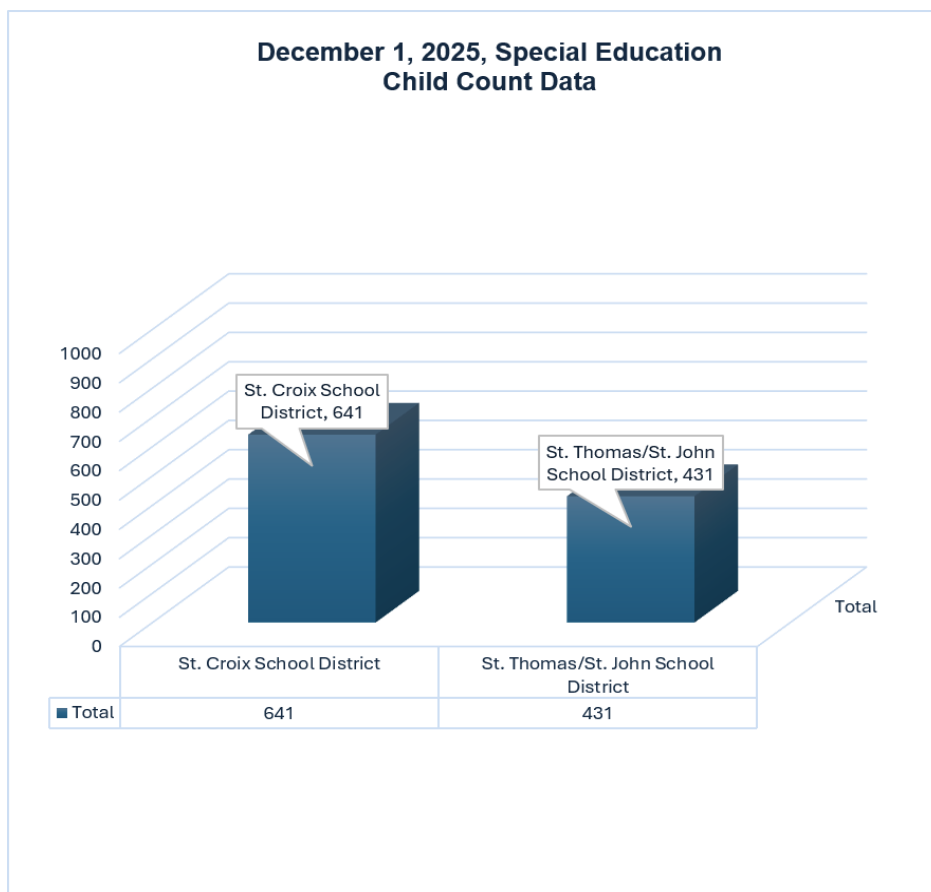
The Committee should also understand that the State Office of Special Education assumed a greater oversight role in district operations out of necessity, not preference. Frequent turnover in district Special Education leadership created disruptions in continuity, delayed decision-making, and hindered the consistent implementation of federal and territorial requirements. Sustained leadership is essential in a program as complex and highly regulated as special education, where compliance, timely services, and accountability directly impact our most vulnerable students.

To ensure that students continued to receive the services and supports to which they are entitled under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the State Office stepped in to provide additional oversight, technical assistance, and operational guidance. This intervention will help to stabilize critical functions, strengthen compliance efforts, and maintain continuity of services while the Department works to rebuild long-term leadership capacity within the districts.

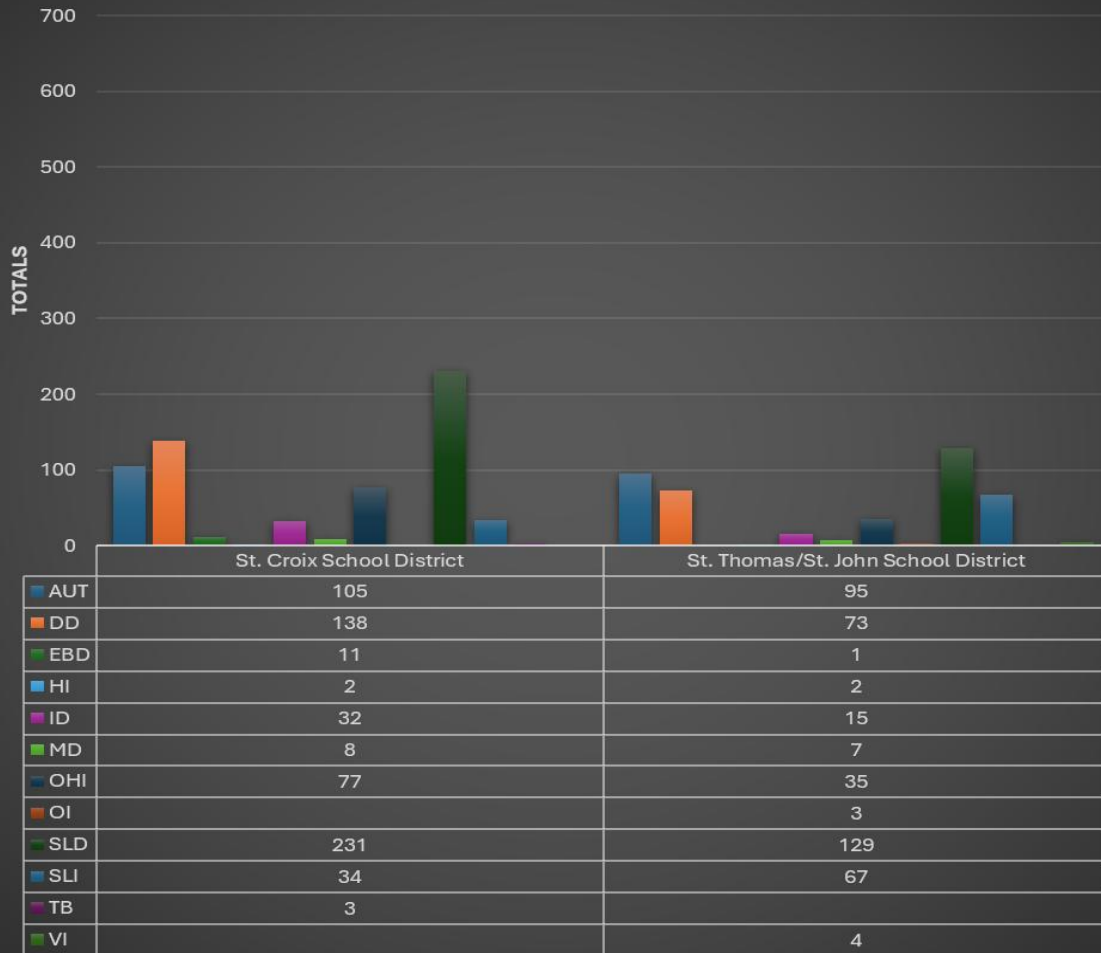
Our goal is not for the State Office to permanently manage district-level operations, but rather to establish the systems, leadership, and accountability necessary for each district to successfully resume full operational responsibility. We remain committed to recruiting and retaining qualified leaders, strengthening institutional capacity, and creating a sustainable framework that ensures every student with a disability receives a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment.

The Department is confident that the steps taken today will result in a stronger, more stable Special Education Division for years to come.

State Office of Special Education Data



**December 1, 2025, Special Education
Child Count Data
By Disability Category**



Compliance with federal and territorial laws, regulations, and requirements

The State Office of Special Education (SOSE) is responsible for ensuring that the Virgin Islands Department of Education complies with all applicable federal and territorial laws governing the education of children and youth with disabilities. Some of these This work is guided by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), 20 U.S.C. §1400 et seq. and its implementing regulations at 34 C.F.R. Part 300, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), and applicable Virgin Islands statutes, regulations, and Board of Education policies. Moreover, the State Office also administers federal IDEA funds and monitors their use to ensure compliance with federal grant requirements and fiscal accountability standards established by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP). Through these activities, the State Office ensures that identified noncompliance is corrected in a timely manner, safeguards the educational rights of children with disabilities, and maintains the Virgin Islands' continued compliance with federal and territorial requirements.

As the State Educational Agency (SEA), the Virgin Islands Department of Education is responsible for ensuring that every eligible child with a disability receives a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). The State Office fulfills this responsibility by providing general supervision of special education programs, conducting compliance and Results-Driven Accountability (RDA) monitoring, investigating complaints, overseeing dispute resolution processes, reviewing policies and procedures, collecting and analyzing statewide data, providing technical assistance and professional development, implementing and verifying corrective action plans, and ensuring fiscal accountability for IDEA grant funds.

Strengthening the Monitoring System

The State Office continues to carry out its federally mandated oversight responsibilities despite significant staffing limitations within its compliance and monitoring functions. At present, the Territory's compliance monitoring responsibilities are being performed the State's Compliance Monitoring unit who provides statewide oversight for both districts. Historically, these responsibilities were distributed among more personnel to ensure expanded monitoring activities, technical assistance, verification of corrective actions, and ongoing compliance oversight. While the State Office remains fully committed to meeting its federal obligations, staff shortages and increased operational demands have placed some challenges on the monitoring system. Although these challenges are present, the State's Compliance Monitoring unit continues to navigate and complete its monitoring obligation. Additional staffing resources would strengthen the State Office's capacity to conduct timely monitoring, provide expanded technical assistance to schools and districts, verify the correction of identified noncompliance, enhance data review and analysis, and further support continuous improvement throughout the Territory. Further, strengthening monitoring functions helps ensure continued compliance with federal requirements, protects the educational rights of students with disabilities, and safeguards the Virgin Islands' continued eligibility for federal special education funding. Moreover, it will

enable the State Office of Special Education to strengthen compliance systems, expand technical assistance, improve monitoring activities, enhance data quality, and fulfill its federally mandated responsibilities effectively.

Commitment to Accountability

The State Office of Special Education remains committed to transparency, collaboration, continuous improvement, and responsible stewardship of public resources. We work closely with schools, educators, families, stakeholders, and community partners to strengthen educational systems and improve outcomes for students with disabilities throughout the Virgin Islands. The budget of the State Office represents an investment in accountability, educational equity, fiscal responsibility, and the continued improvement of special education services across the Territory.

The responsibilities entrusted to State Office of Special Education are mandated under federal law and are essential to protecting the educational rights of children with disabilities throughout the United States Virgin Islands. Continued investment in the State Office of Special Education strengthens our ability to provide effective oversight, ensure compliance with federal and territorial requirements, support educators and families, improve student outcomes, and maintain accountability for the responsible stewardship of public resources. Every appropriation made to the State Office represents an investment in legal compliance, educational excellence, and the future of our children. It also helps preserve the Virgin Islands' continued eligibility to receive critical federal funding that supports special education programs and services across the Territory.

Update on the availability of specialized instructional services, related therapies, and support personnel

For the 2025–2026 school year, related service personnel included:

- 4 Speech-Language Pathologists
- 1 Board Certified Behavior Analyst
- 3 Registered Behavior Technicians
- 2 Occupational Therapists
- 1 Physical Therapist
- 1 Teacher of the Visually Impaired
- 4 School Psychologists
- 1 Educational Diagnostician
- 1 Educational Diagnostician Intern
- 4 School Social Workers

For the 2026 Extended School Year (ESY), staffing included:

- 2 SPED teachers
- 2 SPED paraprofessionals
- 1 Occupational Therapist
- 1 Physical Therapist
- 1 Speech Therapist
- 1 SPED Supervisor

The Educational Diagnostic Center's (EDC) summer evaluations were conducted by 3 administrative staff and 19 professional staff (13 assigned, 6 as needed), including school psychologists, educational diagnosticians, social workers, speech therapist, occupational therapist, physical therapist, a teacher of the visually impaired, and special education teachers.

Several providers particularly occupational therapist, physical therapist, a teacher of the visually impaired were available only on an as-needed or time-limited basis, highlighting the need for more dedicated, full-time related service personnel.

Paraprofessional shortages remain critical, with 7+ documented vacancies and no funded paraprofessional positions currently available.

Eligibility and services provided at the end of the school year

Extended School Year (ESY) services are provided to students whose IEP teams determine that they need continued services to prevent regression. For summer 2026, the District served 15 ESY students across two sites (Ricardo Richards Elementary and Coral Reef Academy), preschool through grade 12, including students with Autism, Multiple Disabilities, Visual Impairment, Developmental Delay, and Other Health Impairment; related services included speech therapist, occupational therapist, physical therapist, a teacher of the visually impaired, with transportation where required. ESY (services for the already eligible) is separate and distinct from the summer testing initiative (evaluations to identify new eligibility).

Status and outcomes of summer initiatives

The district operated a dedicated Summer Evaluations Program through the EDC (June 4–July 8, 2026), funded by a separate local appropriation of **\$196,238 under Bill 36-0309**. As of July 8, 2026, **60 student referrals were processed**, with these outcomes:

- 39 — evaluated, found eligible, IEP finalized
- 4 — evaluated, did not qualify
- 5 — case reviewed (REED)/screened, no further evaluation required
- 3 — evaluation complete, staffing deferred to August (parent unavailable)

- 1 — parent declined consent, referral inactivated
- 8 — recommended for additional August follow-up (medical/audiology, observations, or parent request)

This is part of a multi-year reduction: the backlog inherited in 2024 stood at 403 students and now stands at 119 — roughly a 70% reduction. Completing the remaining 119 is projected at ~\$272,034, leaving a shortfall of ~\$212,956 for evaluations alone (after the ~\$59,078 balance from the Bill 36-0309 allocation).

Efforts to recruit and retain special education teachers, therapists, psychologists, and other service providers

In partnership with Human Resources, the District has secured accepted offers from six (6) international special education teachers, now awaiting J-1 visa issuance by the U.S. Department of State — a federal timeline outside the district's control. Once cleared, they will fill six of the eight teaching vacancies; recruitment for the remaining positions and related-service providers continues as funded positions become available. The summer program's reliance on "as-needed" therapists and a two-week vision specialist underscores the need to recruit dedicated OT, PT, vision, and psychology staff.

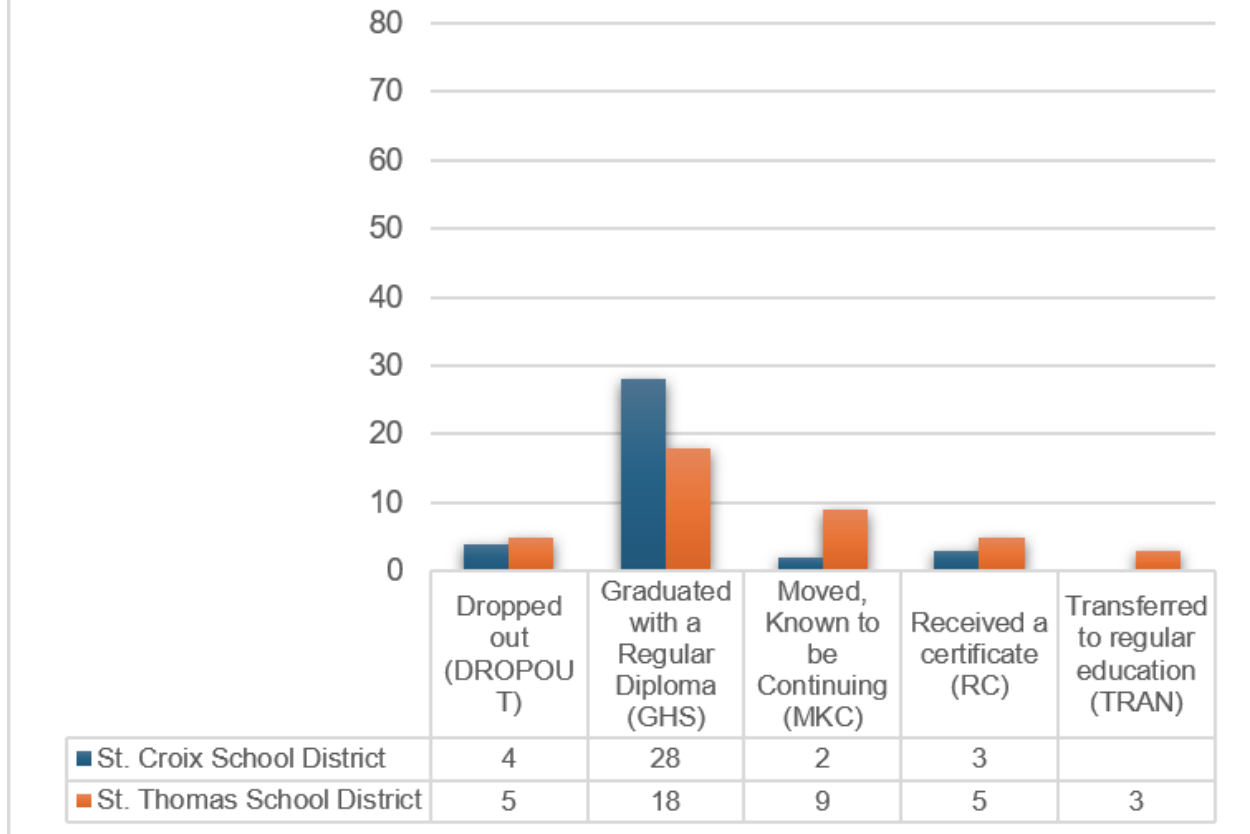
Student outcomes, programmatic challenges, corrective actions, and planned improvements

Outcomes: the summer program finalized 39 IEPs and cleared or advanced all 60 referrals, contributing to the ~70% backlog reduction since 2024. Challenges: 8 teaching vacancies, no funded paraprofessional positions, over-capacity classrooms, the remaining 119-student backlog with a \$212,956 evaluation shortfall, and the federal visa timeline.

Corrective actions/improvements: real-time staffing and referral tracking, the Bill 36-0309 summer initiative, and six international teacher hires; next steps are completing the outstanding evaluations, filling funded vacancies, and securing paraprofessional funding.

Below are the following for the VIDE/SOSE student outcomes, programmatic challenges, corrective actions, and planned improvements

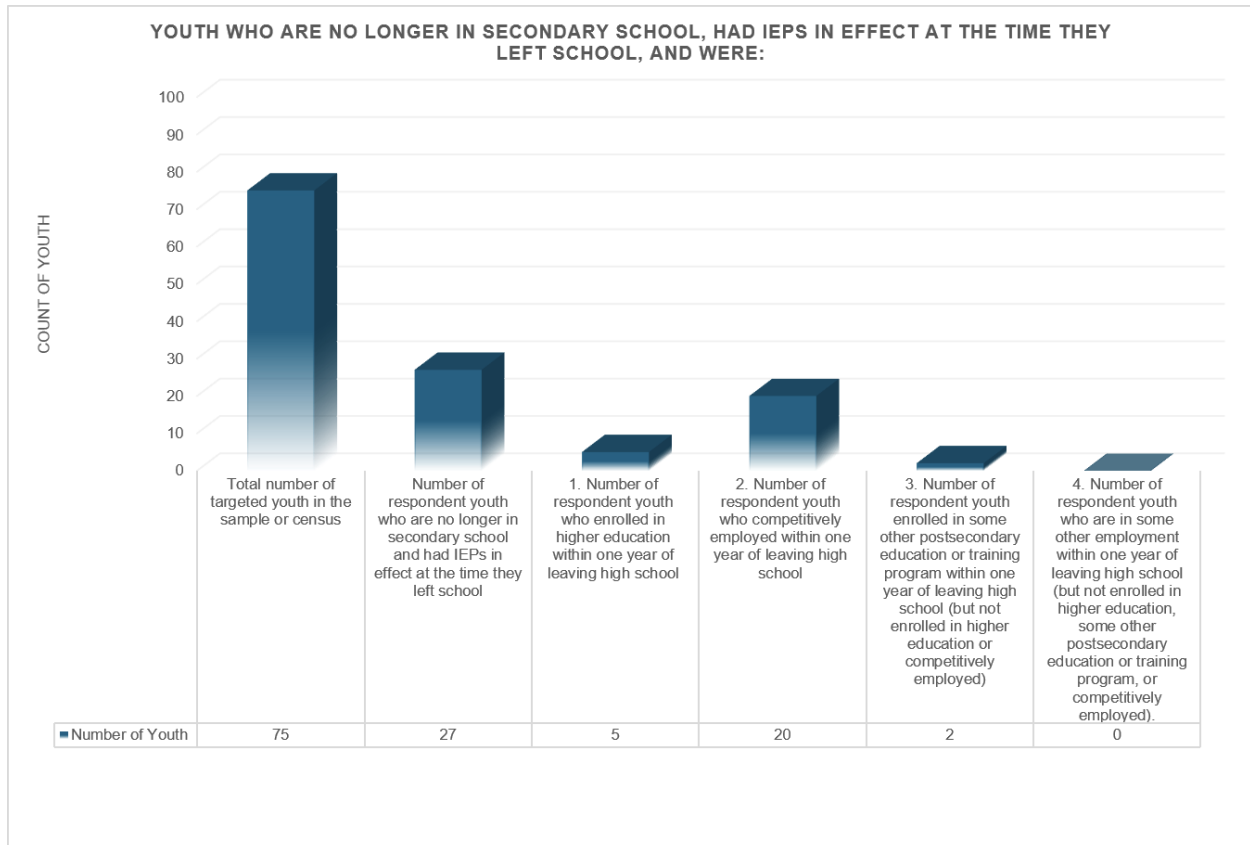
Number of Children/Youth who Exited Special Education Programs During the 2025-25 School Year



Post School Survey Data

This survey collects and reports on data within the VIDE/SOSE State Performance Plan, Annual Performance Report to U.S. Department of Education on the: Percent of youth who are no longer in secondary school, had IEPs in effect at the time they left school, and were:

- A. Enrolled in higher education within one year of leaving high school.
- B. Enrolled in higher education or competitively employed within one year of leaving high school.
- C. Enrolled in higher education or in some other postsecondary education or training program; or competitively employed or in some other employment within one year of leaving high school.



37% of youth who are no longer in secondary school and had IEPs in effect at the time they left school responded to the post school survey.

State Office of Special Education

For Federal Fiscal Year (FFY) 2024, both the St. Thomas/St. John (STTJ) and St. Croix Districts (STX) received findings of noncompliance related to Child Find. These findings were formally reported in the VIDE/SOSE Annual Performance Report (APR) under Indicator 18—General Supervision.

Indicator 18 measures the State's compliance with Part B of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) by assessing the timely correction of identified noncompliance (20 U.S.C. §§ 1412(a)(11) and 1416(a); 34 C.F.R. §§ 300.149, 300.600). Under this indicator, the State must report all findings of noncompliance identified through its general supervision system, including State monitoring, data systems, dispute resolution, fiscal management, and other mechanisms used to identify noncompliance. This information is submitted to the U.S. Department of Education and serves as an important measure of statewide accountability and continuous improvement.

Although both districts received Child Find-related findings of noncompliance, including deficiencies in referrals and evaluations, one district has demonstrated measurable progress, with a notable reduction in noncompliance, as highlighted in this testimony. While this improvement is encouraging, challenges remain and are discussed in the following section.

Programmatic Challenges

Through the State's monitoring and general supervision activities several programmatic challenges have identified within the STTJ District, including:

- Delays in the timely identification and evaluation of students suspected of disabilities, particularly the failure to meet the 45-day evaluation timeline after parental consent.
- A backlog of pending special education referrals, delaying student access to necessary services.
- Inconsistent or incomplete referral and data collection processes, leading to gaps in documentation and tracking.
- Insufficient specialized personnel for Child Find procedures/activities and the use of special education online data management systems (Ed Plan).
- Vacancy in leadership (District Office of Special Education)

Corrective Actions

To address these challenges and restore full compliance, VIDE/SOSE has developed and is implementing a comprehensive Corrective Action Plan (CAP) that includes:

- **State Direct Oversight:** Assumed immediate direct oversight for Child Find activities in the STTJ District.
- **Data Review:** Collect and conduct a comprehensive review of all referral data to standardize processes and ensure accurate, consistent information.
- **Public Outreach:** Launch of a district-wide awareness campaign including targeted outreach to parents, schools, and community stakeholders to increase awareness of referral procedures and available services.
- **Process Standardization and Professional Development:** Standardization referral documentation, and data entry processes and provide targeted professional development on Child Find requirements, evaluation timelines, compliance expectations, and effective use of the school level referral online tracking tool and special education student s management system "EDPlan".
- **Multidisciplinary Evaluation Teams:** Establish multidisciplinary evaluation teams with clearly defined roles, responsibilities, and timelines to ensure evaluations are completed within the required 45-day timeframe following parental consent.

- **Progress Monitoring and Reporting:** Implement robust tracking, monitoring, and reporting systems to monitor referral status, evaluation timelines, and corrective action implementation, enabling timely identification and resolution of delays.
- **Continuous Quality Improvement:** Establish ongoing feedback mechanisms and quality assurance processes to evaluate implementation, identify barriers, and support continuous improvement and sustained compliance.

Planned Improvements

VIDE/SOSE is committed to:

- Eliminate referral backlogs, ensure pending referrals for evaluation are addressed and more importantly maintaining the integrity of Child find IDEA regulation and service delivery for all eligible students.
- Increasing accountability and transparency through improved data management and regular compliance monitoring and reporting.
- Providing ongoing professional development to sustain effective Child Find practices.
- Building collaborative partnerships with district leaders, special education personnel, families, and other stakeholders.

Through these targeted corrective actions which are divided into distinct phases reinforces, the State's responsibility to enforce corrective measures and ensure that all children within the State/Territory are identified, located, and evaluated in accordance with the requirements of 34 CFR §300.111.

Furthermore, through a continuous improvement process, the State is dedicated to regularly reviewing the referral process throughout and beyond the duration of the developed CAP, actively incorporating feedback and lessons learned. This ongoing evaluation will be a testament to our commitment to the continuous enhancement of the overall Child Find process. By leveraging qualitative and quantitative data, the State strives to ensure a timelier, efficient, and transparent process that promotes accountability, supports general supervision, and more specifically meets the requirements of 34C.F.R. §§ 300.101, 300.149 and 300.600 of the IDEA. 2026-2027 School Year and onward.

In sum, the Virgin Islands Department of Education, State Office of Special team recognizes that public resources must be managed wisely, and we remain committed to operating with integrity, transparency, and fiscal responsibility. The State Office of Special team will continue to work collaboratively with our educational partners, stakeholders, and policymakers to ensure that children and youth with disabilities receive high-quality educational opportunities.

State-level and district-level breakdown of all federal funding received for special education programs

The annual Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Part B Grant Award to the U.S. Virgin Islands totals **\$7,641,376**. These funds are allocated to support the St. Thomas–St. John (STTJ) District, the St. Croix (STX) District, and the State Office of Special Education (SOSE). In accordance with federal requirements, the State reserves \$858,867 for state-level activities, while the remaining funds are distributed between the two districts using the federally prescribed allocation formula.

The St. Croix District receives approximately \$3,566,600 in IDEA funding. Due to recent shifts in personnel allocations and service delivery models, the district's expenditure pattern differs significantly from that of the STTJ District. Approximately 32% of the STX budget is dedicated to personnel-related costs, including salaries, stipends, and per diem expenditures. The district's largest cost driver is professional services, which account for approximately 56% of the budget. Student transportation, instructional supplies, and data management activities collectively comprise approximately 5% of expenditures. Additionally, the district is required to allocate 6% of its budget toward indirect costs. Despite having a comparatively larger funding allocation, the district continues to experience a substantial funding gap, as its contractual obligations for student services—including agreements with Orange Tree, Coral Reef Academy, and Remote Speech Services—total approximately \$4,261,610.

The St. Thomas–St. John District receives approximately \$3,215,910 in IDEA funding. However, the district's expenditure distribution is heavily concentrated in personnel costs, with approximately 90% of its budget committed to salaries and related expenses. After accounting for the required 6% allocation for indirect costs, only about 3% of the district's budget remains available to support the Orange Tree Staffing contract. To help address these fiscal constraints and ensure continuity of services, the State Office of Special Education provided \$43,290 from its reserved allocation to maintain access to digital assessment platforms and therapeutic support materials. Additionally, SOSE contributed \$102,118 toward the Orange Tree Staffing contract. The district's total contractual obligation for Orange Tree services is approximately \$2,404,800.

Recognizing the significant fiscal challenges facing both districts, the State Office of Special Education also provided an additional \$12,500 to support professional development and training opportunities. This investment was intended to mitigate service gaps and ensure staff have access to critical training necessary to effectively support students with disabilities across both districts.

Both districts face substantial financial pressure due to the high cost of contracted special education services. In St. Croix, contractual obligations totaling approximately \$4.26 million exceed the district's IDEA allocation of \$3.57 million, creating an inherent funding deficit. Similarly, St. Thomas–St. John has contractual obligations of approximately \$2.4 million for

Outstanding Balances - Service Contracts				
	<u>STX</u>		<u>STTJ</u>	
Orange Tree	\$ 822,920		\$493,964.45	\$ 1,316,885
Coral Reef	103,685.63			
Remote Speech	-	Cost savings (\$7,106.20)		
Abramson School Busing				
Prof. Contracts	\$ 926,606		\$493,964.45	\$1,420,570

Conclusion

In closing, the Virgin Islands Department of Education remains steadfast in its commitment to ensuring that every student with a disability has access to a high-quality education that is individualized, equitable, and fully compliant with federal and local requirements. While we have made meaningful progress in strengthening our systems, expanding services, and improving compliance, significant challenges remain that require sustained investment and partnership.

I respectfully ask for your continued support as we work together to build a stronger, more inclusive education system where every child is empowered to reach their fullest potential. On behalf of the Department of Education, I thank the members of the Committee and the 36th Legislature for your unwavering commitment to the students and families of the Virgin Islands. Together, we can ensure that every learner receives the opportunities, support, and resources necessary to succeed.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee. My team and I remain available to answer any questions you may have.