



36th Legislature of the United States Virgin Islands Committee on Education and Workforce Development

Memorandum

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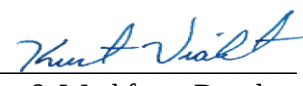
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TO: Mrs. Kurell A. Sheridan, JD
Executive Director
36th Legislature of the Virgin Islands

FROM: The Honorable Kurt A. Violet 
Chairman, Committee on Education & Workforce Development

DATE: July 16, 2026

RE: **Committee Report for Tuesday, July 14, 2026 meeting**

Please find attached the report for the Committee on Education and Workforce Development (EWD) meeting held on **Tuesday, July 14, 2026**, in the Earle B. Ottley Legislative Hall, St. Thomas.

cc: All Senators
Chief Legal Counsel
Archive Division
Journal Division

EDUCATION AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE MEETING REPORT

The Committee on Education and Workforce Development convened its meeting on **Tuesday, July 14, 2026**, in the Earle B. Ottley Legislative Hall, St. Thomas.

Call to order:

Chairman, Senator Kurt A. Violet called the meeting to order at 11:29 a.m.

Committee Members Present:

Senator Kurt A. Violet
Senator Avery L. Lewis
Senator Dwayne M. DeGraff
Senator Kenneth L. Gittens
Senator Franklin D. Johnson
Senator Carla J. Joseph
Senator Marise C. James

Non-Committee Members Present:

Senator Novelle E. Francis, Jr.
Senator Clifford Joseph, Sr.
Senator Milton E. Potter

Protocol Officer:

Jervon Ottley
Myrna de Altier Pickard

Clerk/Timekeeper:

Janella John, Communications Manager

Sergeant at Arms:

Walton Jack, Jr. (STX)
Delvin Fleming (STT)

Committee Staff:

Gloryvee Christian-Krieger, Chief of Staff
Samanta Prentice, Chief Researcher

Legislative Reporters:

Part I – Nadine Williams
Part II – Nataya Munoz
Part III – Joanne Samuel
Part IV – Vashti Barry
Part V – Tricia Sealey

Public Affairs/ Media:

Diana Cruz
Jamal Potter
Chantel Acosta
Bernard Matthew, Sr.
Diana Cruz
Alwyn Baptiste
Chaunte Herbert
Melissa Gustave

The Committee on Education and Workforce Development convened its meeting on **Tuesday, July 14, 2026**, to receive testimony on the status updates regarding redistricting efforts, special education programs, school readiness initiatives, and school demolition and reconstruction projects.

BLOCK I: School Demolition and Reconstruction Projects

The Committee received testimony regarding the status of FEMA-funded school demolition, reconstruction, and modernization projects across the Territory.

Virgin Islands Department of Education

Commissioner Dr. Dionne Wells-Hedrington reported that the Department is managing a portfolio of **22 active capital projects** in various stages of environmental review, design, procurement, permitting, demolition, and construction.

Following Hurricanes Irma and Maria, more than 45 school properties were evaluated to determine whether repair or full replacement represented the most responsible use of federal recovery funding. Those efforts resulted in FEMA approving approximately **\$3.68 billion** in November 2023 for the reconstruction and modernization of the Territory's public-school system. The Department explained that each federally funded project must complete several regulatory and technical steps, including environmental and historic preservation reviews, cost validation, architectural and engineering design, FEMA approval, Coastal Zone Management review, permitting, and procurement. These requirements have contributed to lengthy project timelines but are intended to ensure accountability, resilience, safety, and responsible use of federal funding.

The Department identified the opening of the new **Arthur A. Richards PreK-8 School** as its most significant immediate milestone. The school is scheduled to open to students on August 10, 2026. Student placements and employee transfers have been completed, parent notifications were distributed, and weekly transition meetings are being held to address staffing, building systems, technology, maintenance, and operational readiness. A ribbon-cutting ceremony is scheduled for August 7th, followed by community tours and an appreciation event on August 8th. VIDE estimated that maintaining the new Arthur A. Richards campus will cost at least **\$5 per square foot annually**. The Department plans to issue a request for proposals for maintenance assistance after receiving the facility's final owner's manual.

Additional project updates included:

Charlotte Amalie High School: Buildings A, B, and C were demolished in 2025. The design-build team is advancing the project from the initial 30% design to final construction documents. The first phase will include two three-story academic buildings, an administration building, cafeteria, auditorium, and gymnasium. A later phase will include an additional academic building, track, athletic field, and parking.

Bertha C. Boschulte PreK-8 School: FEMA has authorized the modernization project. Early construction packages and orders for long-lead materials are being prepared, and minor work has begun. A safe room is planned once Hazard Mitigation Grant Program funding is secured.

Julius E. Sprauve PreK-12 School: FEMA approved the design, which was reviewed by the St. John Coastal Zone Management Committee. VIDE is working with the Department of Property and Procurement and the Virgin Islands Housing Authority to acquire nearby land for a ball field. The design is intended to preserve historic areas and minimize site disturbance.

St. Croix Central High School: The project has moved into visible implementation following its groundbreaking. Demolition of the existing gymnasium is underway. Students and staff will move into the new academic buildings before the remaining structures are demolished and replaced with athletic and recreational facilities.

St. Croix Educational Complex: Design and construction work will occur in phases. VIDE staff familiar with the campus are working with the designer and contractor to address existing building

systems and known facility problems. Technology, furniture, and long-lead materials are being ordered.

Bundled School Projects: A design-build team was selected to deliver 11 additional facilities across both districts. These include Claude O. Markoe, Alexander Henderson, Lockhart, Alfredo Andrews, Pearl B. Larsen, Bowsky, Oliver, Tuitt, Eudora Kean High School, and new administrative facilities on St. Thomas and St. Croix.

The Department stated that the typical timeline for a new school project is approximately five years: 18 months for initial design and environmental review, 12 months to complete design and early construction work, and approximately three years for full construction. High school projects may require additional time.

By 2030, VIDE expects 11 major projects representing approximately **65% of the \$3.68 billion investment** to be completed. The remaining projects are expected to continue through 2031. VIDE emphasized that the projects are intended not only to replace damaged buildings but to create modern instructional environments supporting STEM education, career and technical education, technology integration, arts, athletics, flexible learning spaces, accessibility, school safety, and community use.

Department of Planning and Natural Resources

Commissioner Jean-Pierre L. Oriol was invited to provide testimony regarding environmental reviews, Coastal Zone Management approvals, permitting, and other regulatory requirements affecting school reconstruction projects. Commissioner was not able to be present but sent in a testimony.

BLOCK II: Redistricting Efforts and School Readiness Initiatives

The Committee received updates regarding the completion of the St. Croix redistricting process, preparations for the 2026–2027 academic year, staffing, transportation, instructional priorities, and ongoing school maintenance and capital improvements.

Virgin Islands Department of Education

VIDE reported that all student placements connected to the closure of John H. Woodson Junior High School and the opening of Arthur A. Richards PreK-8 School have been completed.

Former Woodson students were generally assigned to schools nearest to their verified residential addresses. The Department also considered exceptional family circumstances, including parents employed at particular school sites, as well as the specialized services and accommodations required by students with disabilities.

The eighth-grade class at Arthur A. Richards reached capacity during the latter portion of the registration period. Consequently, a small number of students registering in May and June were assigned to Eulalie R. Rivera PreK-8 School. VIDE stated that enrollment will continue to be monitored, and students may be assigned to the next nearest school whenever a grade level reaches its maximum capacity.

St. Croix School Readiness

The St. Croix District will enter the second year of an improvement plan centered on four strategic pillars:

- Multi-Tiered Systems of Support;
- Attendance;
- Accountability; and
- Leadership coaching.

The district is placing increased emphasis on strong, standards-based Tier 1 instruction, structured data reviews, classroom walkthroughs, targeted interventions, professional development, and alignment between curriculum, assessments, and school improvement plans.

Beginning in the 2026–2027 school year, St. Croix Elementary Schools serving kindergarten through sixth grade will operate from **8:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.** K-8 schools will operate from **8:15 a.m. to 3:15 p.m.** The two high schools will retain their existing schedule of **7:40 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.**

The district also made staffing shifts associated with redistricting to fill vacancies, strengthen school leadership, align personnel with student enrollment, and support the opening of Arthur A. Richards. Recruitment and retention remain priorities, particularly in hard-to-fill instructional areas.

Professional development for the upcoming school year will focus on classroom management, student engagement, standards-based planning, social-emotional learning, cultural responsiveness, instructional technology, data analysis, early childhood education, paraprofessional support, and leadership development.

St. Thomas-St. John School Readiness

The St. Thomas-St. John District reported **66 vacancies** across instructional, administrative, support, and operational positions. These included vacancies for elementary teachers, career and technical education teachers, secondary science, mathematics, English and social studies teachers, paraprofessionals, computer teachers, nurses, custodians, school administrators, and district coordinators.

The district continues to rely on substitute teachers, retirees, paraprofessionals, locally trained professionals, and international teachers participating in the J-1 visa program.

Transportation arrangements remain largely unchanged. School Bus Inc. provides general education transportation on St. Thomas, while Varlack Auto Rentals serves general education students on St. John. VIDE operates transportation for students with disabilities using seven drivers on St. Thomas and one on St. John.

The district reported an attendance rate of approximately **92.9% for the 2025–2026 school year**, below its goal of 95%. For 2026–2027, the district intends to increase average daily attendance to 95% and reduce chronic absenteeism by at least 20%. An early-warning system will identify and initiate interventions for students reaching three, five, and ten absences.

Most St. Thomas-St. John schools, particularly at the elementary level, are currently at or near capacity. VIDE stated that significant redistricting cannot be considered in that district until additional school construction creates sufficient space.

The district will continue implementing MTSS, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, attendance interventions, curriculum alignment, instructional leadership development, and the USVI Leadership Academy in partnership with National Academic Educational Partners.

Bureau of School Construction and Maintenance

Executive Director Craig Benjamin reported that BSCM invested approximately **\$4.03 million** in maintenance and capital improvement projects during Fiscal Year 2026.

Approximately **\$3.02 million** was spent in the St. Croix District, while approximately **\$1.01 million** was invested in the St. Thomas-St. John District. The work included HVAC installations and repairs, roofing, mold remediation, restroom renovations, electrical improvements, security systems, fencing, landscaping, plumbing, pest control, janitorial services, playground improvements, lighting, and indoor-air-quality work.

In addition, the Legislature appropriated approximately **\$2.1 million for school readiness projects**, divided equally between the two school districts at approximately \$1.05 million each.

Summer maintenance work included painting, pressure washing, air-conditioning maintenance, cleaning, electrical inspections, preventive maintenance, campus beautification, restroom renovations, and general repairs. BSCM partnered with the Department of Labor's Summer Youth Employment Program and the Department of Education's School Lunch Program to expand its available workforce.

Key St. Thomas-St. John projects included:

- *Roof repairs at Ulla F. Muller Elementary School;*
- *Modular classroom flooring at Julius E. Sprauve, Lockhart, and Bertha C. Boschulte;*
- *Continued deep cleaning at Bertha C. Boschulte;*
- *Exterior deck replacement, classroom painting, and flooring repairs at Charlotte Amalie High School; and*
- *Districtwide electrical inspections and replacement of defective lighting components.*

Key St. Croix projects included:

- *Restroom renovations at Pearl B. Larsen, Alfredo Andrews, Lew Muckle, St. Croix Educational Complex, and CTEC;*
- *Cafeteria improvements at Claude O. Markoe;*
- *Roof repairs at Adult Education, Ricardo Richards, and Eulalie Rivera;*
- *Safety improvements at Juanita Gardine, including removal of an unsafe walkway and aging playground equipment;*
- *Music-room improvements at Central High School; and*
- *Painting, preventive maintenance, HVAC work, cleaning, and beautification at multiple campuses.*

BSCM acknowledged that the school-readiness appropriation became available later than anticipated, creating a compressed construction schedule. Some contractor-led projects may continue beyond the first day of school. The Bureau stated that phased work schedules and mitigation plans will be used to prevent construction from compromising instruction or campus safety.

The Bureau identified aging facilities, decades of deferred maintenance, procurement timelines, contractor availability, rising construction costs, long lead times for materials, late funding, and the limited summer construction window as continuing challenges. BSCM committed to strengthening preventive maintenance, conducting regular inspections, monitoring contractors, and prioritizing projects based on health, safety, and operational needs.

BLOCK III: Status of Special Education Programs

The Committee received testimony concerning facilities, staffing, student enrollment, evaluations, related services, federal compliance, Extended School Year services, funding, and corrective actions within the Territory's special education programs.

Virgin Islands Department of Education

VIDE explained that the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act requires eligible students with disabilities to receive a Free Appropriate Public Education through individualized education programs and services delivered in the least restrictive environment.

St. Croix District

The St. Croix Special Education Office remains housed at La Grande Princesse. Although industrial air-conditioning units, cleaning, and partial internet service have been provided, the facility continues to experience infrastructure, connectivity, furniture, equipment, privacy, and workspace challenges.

The district reported serving **685 students with disabilities**. Of 41 special education teaching positions, 33 are filled and eight remain vacant. Vacancies were reported at Central High School, Pearl B. Larsen, Alfredo Andrews, Eulalie Rivera, Juanita Gardine, and Arthur A. Richards.

Six international special education teachers accepted employment offers and are awaiting J-1 visa approval. Once cleared, they are expected to fill six of the eight existing teaching vacancies.

Paraprofessional shortages remain critical. At least seven vacancies were identified, and the district reported that no additional funded special education paraprofessional positions were available. Several self-contained classrooms are serving 13 to 14 students despite a recommended staffing ratio of ten students, one teacher, and one paraprofessional.

The St. Croix District reduced its evaluation backlog from **403 students in 2024 to 119 students**, representing an approximately 70% reduction.

*A summer evaluation initiative was funded through a **\$196,238 appropriation under Bill No. 36-0309**. Sixty referrals were processed between June 4 and July 8, 2026:*

- *39 students were evaluated, found eligible, and received finalized IEPs;*
- *Four students were evaluated and did not qualify;*
- *Five cases were screened and required no further evaluation;*
- *Three evaluations were completed but staffing meetings were deferred;*
- *One parent declined consent; and*
- *Eight cases require additional follow-up.*

Completing evaluations for the remaining 119 students is projected to cost approximately **\$272,034**. With roughly \$59,078 remaining from the appropriation, VIDE identified an estimated **\$212,956 funding shortfall** for evaluations alone. This amount does not include the teachers, classrooms, paraprofessionals, therapies, and other services that may be required for newly eligible students.

Extended School Year services were provided to 15 students at Ricardo Richards Elementary School and Coral Reef Academy. Services included special education instruction, speech therapy, occupational therapy, physical therapy, visual-impairment support, and transportation where required.

St. Thomas-St. John District

The St. Thomas-St. John Special Education Office was relocated from the Leonard Dober Complex to Tutu Park Mall because of mold and indoor-air-quality complaints.

The district reported 18 special education vacancies, including 12 paraprofessional vacancies and vacancies in early childhood and co-teaching positions.

No initial evaluations or re-evaluations were completed during summer 2026. The district reported **44 incomplete initial evaluations** and **120 re-evaluations that were out of compliance** with required timelines.

VIDE attributed these delays to shortages of qualified personnel, supervision requirements, documentation, scheduling problems, and turnover in special education leadership. Because of those operational and leadership gaps, the State Office of Special Education assumed increased oversight of the district's Child Find, evaluation, and compliance functions.

The Department emphasized that state-level control is intended to stabilize district operations temporarily while leadership, staffing, data systems, and accountability structures are rebuilt.

State Office of Special Education

The State Office reported that both districts received findings of noncompliance related to **Child Find** for Federal Fiscal Year 2024. The most significant concerns included delayed referrals and evaluations, failure to meet the 45-day evaluation timeline, incomplete data, inconsistent documentation, insufficient specialized personnel, leadership vacancies, and inadequate use of the EDPlan data-management system.

A Corrective Action Plan is being implemented that includes:

- Direct state oversight of Child Find activities;
- Review and standardization of referral data;

- Parent and community outreach;
- Professional development;
- Standardized documentation and data-entry procedures;
- Multidisciplinary evaluation teams;
- Improved monitoring and reporting systems; and
- Continuous quality-improvement reviews.

The State Office also reported limited staffing within its compliance and monitoring operations. Additional personnel are needed to conduct reviews, provide technical assistance, verify corrective actions, improve data quality, and protect the Territory's continued eligibility for federal special education funding.

For the 2025–2026 school year, related service personnel included speech-language pathologists, occupational and physical therapists, school psychologists, social workers, behavioral specialists, registered behavior technicians, an educational diagnostician, and a teacher of the visually impaired. Several positions were available only through contracts or on a limited basis.

Federal Funding

The annual IDEA Part B award totals approximately **\$7.64 million**:

- State Office reserve: approximately **\$858,867**;
- St. Croix District: approximately **\$3.57 million**; and
- St. Thomas-St. John District: approximately **\$3.22 million**.

St. Croix reported approximately \$4.26 million in contractual obligations for services, exceeding its IDEA allocation. St. Thomas-St. John reported an approximately \$2.4 million obligation for Orange Tree Staffing alone, while roughly 90% of the district's IDEA budget is committed to personnel.

VIDE warned that current funding levels are insufficient to sustain existing service-delivery models without supplemental support. The cost of contracted services leaves limited funding for early intervention, technology, evidence-based instructional programs, data-system improvements, professional development, and recruitment and retention.

The Department concluded that, while measurable progress has been made in St. Croix, significant staffing, funding, facility, leadership, and compliance challenges remain across the Territory.

American Federation of Teachers — St. Thomas-St. John Local 1825

President Leontyne Jones was invited to testify regarding the experiences and concerns of educators and support personnel working within special education programs but did not show up to the hearing.

American Federation of Teachers — St. Croix Local 1826

President Tamieka Phillipus was invited to testify regarding staffing, working conditions, classroom capacity, resources, facilities, and services for students with disabilities but did not show up to the hearing.

Committee requests:

During the hearing, Committee members requested the following information from the testifiers:

1. **Senator Clifford Joseph, Sr.** requested that the Bureau of School Construction and Maintenance or the New Schools Architect within the Virgin Islands Department of Education provide the percentage of contracts awarded to local businesses, along with the total dollar amount of those awards.
2. **Senator Carla J. Joseph** requested the names of all contractors paid in connection with the completed projects identified in BSCM's project listing.
3. **Senator Milton E. Potter** requested the number of educators currently teaching special education who do not possess the required special education certification.
4. **Committee Chairman Senator Kurt A. Violet** requested a breakdown of the additional positions needed to adequately support the Territory's special education programs, including the number and type of positions and the estimated funding required to fill them.

Adjournment:

The Committee on Education and Workforce Development meeting adjourned at 6:57 p.m.