

Dionne Wells-Hedrington, Ed.D.
Commissioner

GOVERNMENT OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS
**DEPARTMENT OF
EDUCATION**



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October 16, 2026

The Honorable Angel L. Bolques, Jr.
Senator at Large
36th Legislature of the Virgin Islands
Capitol Building
Post Office Box 1690
St. Thomas, Virgin Islands 00804
VIA Email: senatorbolques@legvi.org

Dear Senator Bolques:

The Virgin Islands Department of Education (VIDE/the Department) submits this written testimony in support of Bill No. 36-0349, recognizing the artistic, educational, and cultural contributions of **Austin M. Petersen** and formally designating Black Utopia Lane on St. Thomas as a cultural landmark of the Virgin Islands.

Mr. Petersen's 36 years of service with the Department, during which he instructed students in graphic arts, photography, painting, printing, and related creative disciplines, reflect a commitment to arts education and the development of young Virgin Islanders. His work on Black Utopia Lane, which began in 1982, extends that educational legacy into the community, where the mural has become a public expression of Virgin Islands history, cultural identity, and collective artistic achievement.

The Department recognizes the value of preserving this cultural resource and supports the legislation's intention to create opportunities for students to participate in its stewardship. We also believe that effective implementation requires clearly defined educational responsibilities, appropriate professional conservation standards, and a sustainable funding framework.

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Educational Opportunities and Departmental Capacity

Section 5 of the proposed legislation authorizes the Commissioner of Education to establish a Public Art Preservation initiative through which public high school students may participate in supervised maintenance and preservation activities at Black Utopia Lane. Student participation may qualify toward community service graduation requirements, subject to applicable departmental policies and approval procedures.

The proposed initiative could complement instruction in the visual arts, Virgin Islands History, career and technical education, and community-based learning. Students could engage in historical research, photographic documentation, oral history collection, heritage interpretation, and supervised field activities that connect classroom instruction with the preservation of cultural resources. However, the Department must consider its existing instructional staffing capacity, particularly the availability of educators with specialized disciplines such as visual arts. The Department's primary responsibility remains the delivery of instruction, and establishing an ongoing mural preservation program should not result in additional unfunded obligations or the reassignment of essential classroom personnel.

Accordingly, the VIDE recommends that art educators serve as educational advisers and curriculum partners where staffing and schedules permit, rather than being designated as the primary workforce responsible for maintaining or restoring the mural.

The Department further recommends exploring partnerships with practicing artists, conservation professionals, cultural organizations, and other qualified community practitioners who could provide specialized instruction and supervise student participation. Such partnerships would permit meaningful educational engagement while protecting existing instructional responsibilities.

A phased implementation approach would allow VIDE to assess student interest, school participation, transportation, supervision, and administrative requirements before determining the appropriate scope of the initiative.

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Professional Conservation, Artistic Integrity, and Student Apprenticeship

The Department emphasizes that preserving Black Utopia Lane requires a clear distinction between routine maintenance, repainting, and the professional conservation of an original work of art.

The American Institute for Conservation (AIC), a professional organization dedicated to the preservation of cultural heritage, promotes principles of preventive care, documentation, professional competence, and ethical conservation practices. These principles recognize that interventions affecting original materials must be carefully evaluated to avoid unnecessary alteration or irreversible damage.

In this context, repainting a deteriorated section of the mural is not necessarily equivalent to conserving it. The application of incompatible paints, changes to the original composition, or attempts to recreate imagery without appropriate documentation could compromise the work's artistic integrity and historical authenticity.

The Department therefore recommends that any conservation, restoration, or physical intervention affecting the original painted surfaces be undertaken or directly supervised by Mr. Petersen, where practicable, in collaboration with a qualified artist or conservation professional possessing demonstrated expertise appropriate to the work being performed.

Professional qualifications should be assessed through relevant education, training, practical experience, and demonstrated competence in mural conservation or the materials and techniques involved. While professional organizations establish ethical and technical standards, the Department does not recommend imposing a universal certification requirement that may not correspond with the professional credentialing systems available in the United States.

This distinction also presents an educational opportunity. Rather than treating student participation primarily as a source of labor for repainting or maintaining a public wall, the initiative could introduce an apprenticeship-based learning model in which students observe and assist qualified practitioners.

Under appropriate supervision, students could learn to document existing conditions, identify deterioration, understand the characteristics of artistic materials, and examine the ethical

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considerations involved in conserving public artwork. Hands-on participation affecting original painted surfaces should occur only when appropriate to the students' preparation and under qualified professional oversight.

Mr. Petersen and his artistic collaborators should remain important participants in developing the preservation approach, given their firsthand knowledge of the mural's creation, evolution, materials, and cultural meaning.

This framework would protect the original artwork while introducing students to potential career pathways in fine arts, conservation, cultural heritage management, and related creative industries.

Fiscal Considerations and Recommended Legislative Clarifications

Section 6(a) of Bill No. 36-0349 appropriates \$10,000 from the General Fund of the Treasury of the Virgin Islands to the Department of Public Works for the design, production, and installation of a commemorative plaque. Section 6(b) separately provides that the Legislature may appropriate an amount not exceeding \$10,000 in any fiscal year to the Department of Education for paint, painting supplies, tools, and related materials necessary for the mural's maintenance, preservation, and restoration.

The Department recognizes this proposed funding mechanism but emphasizes that Section 6(b) does not establish a guaranteed annual appropriation. Additionally, the eligible expenditures identified in the bill do not expressly address the operational and professional services required to administer a supervised educational preservation initiative.

VIDE respectfully recommends the following clarifications:

1. Establish a More Defined Funding Framework

Clarify how funds would be appropriated and allocated to VIDE, including whether the Legislature intends to provide recurring annual support or require separate appropriations for each fiscal year.

The Department recommends consideration of an identifiable funding mechanism that would permit realistic planning without requiring the diversion of existing instructional resources.



2. Expand Eligible Program Expenditures

Consider amending Section 6(b) to include reasonable expenses associated with transportation, student safety equipment, qualified professional instruction, apprenticeship supervision, and specialized conservation services.

The Department further recommends that the Legislature evaluate whether the proposed \$10,000 annual ceiling would adequately support the intended scope of the initiative, particularly if professional services and student transportation are included.

3. Clarify Professional Preservation Responsibilities

Amend Section 5 to distinguish student educational activities from specialized conservation and restoration. Work affecting the original mural should be undertaken or supervised by appropriately qualified practitioners, with Mr. Petersen and his collaborators consulted wherever practicable.

4. Define Interagency and Property Coordination

Establish coordination procedures among VIDE, the Department of Public Works, the artist and his collaborators, and appropriate property stakeholders.

Because the mural is located along Weymouth Rhymer Highway on property identified in the legislation as Hartman property, implementation should include confirmation of site access permissions, roadway safety considerations, student supervision requirements, and applicable liability protections.

5. Clarify the Applicable Fiscal Year

Section 6(a) identifies an appropriation for the fiscal year ending September 30, 2026, although the proposed legislation is being considered after that date. The Department recommends reviewing this language to ensure that the appropriation corresponds with the intended fiscal year and can be administered in accordance with applicable fiscal requirements.

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Long-Term Stewardship and Educational Sustainability

The Department recognizes that the continued preservation of Black Utopia Lane will require planning beyond individual student service activities. A sustainable framework should provide for appropriate documentation, periodic condition assessments, clearly defined maintenance responsibilities, and professional guidance when restoration is necessary.

Within its educational mandate, VIDE could explore opportunities for students to contribute through approved research, photography, oral history, and interpretive projects that document the mural's artistic development and cultural significance.

These activities could establish a useful record for future preservation efforts while strengthening students' research, creative, and historical interpretation skills.

The Department's participation would remain subject to available staffing, appropriated resources, administrative approvals, and the educational priorities of participating schools. Specialized conservation responsibilities should remain with qualified practitioners rather than becoming an additional obligation for classroom educators.

Conclusion

The Virgin Islands Department of Education supports Bill No. 36-0349 and recognizes the contributions of Austin M. Petersen to the territory's educational and cultural heritage.

The proposed Public Art Preservation initiative presents an opportunity to connect students with the professional practices, historical knowledge, and community responsibilities associated with safeguarding public art.

The Department respectfully recommends that the Legislature strengthen the bill through clearer funding provisions, appropriate conservation safeguards, and an implementation framework that recognizes existing instructional staffing limitations.

With these considerations addressed, VIDE welcomes the opportunity to explore responsible partnerships that honor Mr. Petersen's artistic legacy while providing meaningful educational experiences for future generations.

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Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony for the legislative record.

Respectfully,

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

Dionne Wells-Hedrington, Ed.D.
Commissioner of Education

Copy: Victor Somme III, Assistant Commissioner
Renee Charleswell, Ph.D.
Deputy Commissioner for Curriculum and Instruction