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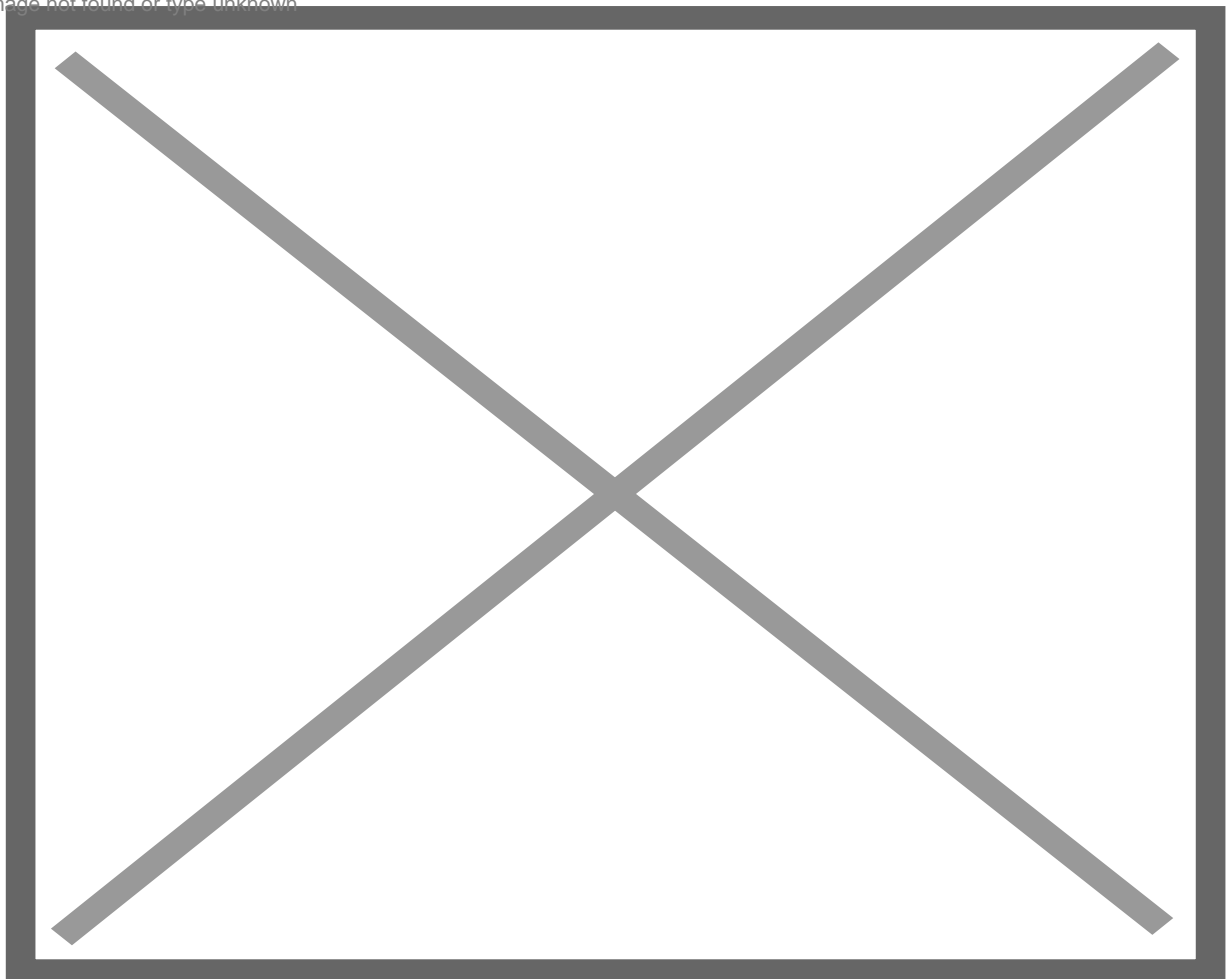
Dept. of Education Has 541 Non-Certified Educators, Sparking Debate on Educational Standards

With 541 non-certified educators, lawmakers express concern over the potential impact on educational quality in the U.S. Virgin Islands

Education / **Published On June 18, 2024 05:43 AM /**

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There are 541 non-certified teachers providing instruction to students across the U.S Virgin Islands, a number that dwarfs the mere 366 certified educators in the territory, a revelation that troubled lawmakers this week.

Senators on the Committee on Education and Workforce Development discussed the issue for several hours during their meeting on Monday. According to information from Education Commissioner Dionne Wells-Hedrington, principals continue to report a “high percentage” of teachers and administrators who are either not certified or not up to date with their certification. It’s a reality that remains “very troubling” for the commissioner, who explained to lawmakers that

while the Department of Education continues to provide opportunities for teachers to become certified, “people are not utilizing the platform as much as we would like.”

Under typical circumstances, teachers who choose not to become certified would be released from service. However, with the ongoing teacher shortage, every educator—certified or not—is desperately needed. Compounding the human resource deficit are the 126 educational professionals who currently qualify for retirement, Dr. Wells-Hedrington noted.

Nonetheless, both the VIDE and the Board of Education continue to press on. In a gentle nudge toward compliance, VIDE recently issued formal letters to all delinquent teachers and administrators. The Board of Education, too, says it's visiting schools during designated professional development days to emphasize the need to become certified, including providing information on all relevant documentation. However that process, argued Senator Franklin Johnson, “is not working.”

He was one of several lawmakers to interrogate the Board of Education on its efforts to address this thorny issue. The board is responsible for the certification of teachers but continues to face significant headwinds. In a statement that seemed to highlight a lack of collaboration between the government arms responsible for education, Board Chair Kyza Callwood admitted that the Board of Education is not copied on the letters sent out by VIDE's human resource department. Still, he supported the issuance of those letters, noting that “if things are not documented, the individuals [would not see] that this is serious.”

The Board of Education has also identified the need for a mindset shift among the territory's teaching professionals. Mr. Callwood summed up the prevailing sentiment as “they ain't going to trouble me if I'm not certified because they have nobody to teach in the school system.” In a personal appeal, he reminded teachers that “when you took this job, you put your mind that you're going to teach our students to be remarkable citizens.” To successfully do so, Mr. Callwood says, educators must participate in the “professional development hours and requirements necessary ... to be a remarkable teacher.”

Senator Donna Frett-Gregory was another lawmaker who does not believe that these efforts are enough. She recalled now-discontinued programs from the Board of Education that “pushed the agenda to ensure that teachers would come in to become certified.” Seemingly frustrated by the conversation, Ms. Frett-Gregory contended that “what we're doing is nothing...we don't have to reinvent the wheel...It briefs well, but there is action that could be occurring as we speak.”

A portion of the conversation focused on potential incentives for teachers to become certified. “The board used to pay for whatever the teachers needed. There was a program in place,” remembered Frett-Gregory who argued that they should be brought back. Currently, existing incentives are centered around grants for teachers to access the relevant certification hours. The Board is also exploring opportunities that could make certification hours more accessible to educators and administrators.

“If we were to right now fire every every teacher who is not certified, we would only have 366 teachers in the United States Virgin Islands,” observed committee chair Senator Marise James, who also called for more proactive solutions. She encouraged VIDE and the Board of Education to work more collaboratively to ensure teachers do not “fall through the cracks.”

Perhaps, suggested Senator Carla Joseph, declining certification rates could be a contributor to low test scores across the territory. She declared that teachers who remain uncertified face greater scrutiny and accountability moving forward. “Their feet need to be held to the fire.”

