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Dept. of Education to Intensify Efforts Against Chronic Absenteeism with DHS and Court Aid

Chronic absenteeism rates have surged to 38.4% in St. Croix, while dropping in St. Thomas, prompting the Department of Education to seek assistance from the Superior Court and DHS to address and mitigate the escalating issue effectively

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“Schools are struggling with students who have issues attending school regularly.” That was Commissioner of Education Dionne Wells-Hedrington on Monday, as she promised lawmakers that the Department of Education would be cracking down on chronic absenteeism come September.

Education officials who continuously crunch attendance data have identified trends including “which days of the week have higher absentee rates, whether absenteeism is more prevalent in certain grades and among specific student demographics,” Mrs. Wells-Hedrington told members of the Senate Committee on Education and Workforce Development.

She said that VIDE is aware that “early identification enables timely intervention,” and noted that there is a “strong correlation between attendance and academic performance.” That is why the department has committed to ensuring students do not fall behind, pledging resources to tackle not just absenteeism but also to “identify issues such as bullying, lack of engagement, or other factors contributing to the negative environment.”

As has been previously reported by VIDE, the largest percentage of absentee students are in the Pre-K to Second Grade levels. “We are petitioning our parents to understand that bringing your child to school is not an option, but a requirement,” said Wells-Hedrington. VIDE has pledged to engage in conversation with the Department of Human Services to make arrangements to refer chronically absent students to DHS for intervention, “especially if contact is made with parents and no improvements are made.”?

Taking it one step further, Mrs. Wells-Hedrington told committee members that VIDE will “seek assistance from the family division of the Virgin Island Superior Court for chronic absenteeism” where necessary. Where students are regularly absent due to health concerns, special provisions will be made. Specialized teams within VIDE will “put measures in place to bridge the gaps in academics.”

?In St. Croix, absenteeism rates grew to 38.4% in the 2023/2024 school year, up from 33.7% in the 2021/2022 school year. Conversely, absenteeism fell in the St. Thomas district, Dr. Wells-Hedrington noted.

Alarmed by the St. Croix figures, Senator Novelle Francis was curious about what actions would have the most impact in reducing chronic absenteeism among students. According to Mrs. Wells-Hedrington, the issue must be addressed from both a “holistic, territorial perspective” and in individual education districts. Collaborating with agencies like DHS is necessary to “close the achievement gaps that we're seeing,” she said.

“If us reaching out isn't making an impact, we've got to escalate that up,” said the commissioner.