

## Implementation of V.I. and Caribbean History into Curriculum Faces New Delay as Commissioner Calls for Revisit of Legislation

Education commissioner tells senators that the legislation may need to be revisited because additional personnel are required to meet the standalone class mandate for K through Eight, highlighting significant staffing and resource challenges

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Education Commissioner Dionne Wells-Hedrington before the 35th Legislature last week. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE

“Honestly, I think that we may need to revisit some parts of the legislation.” That was the admission from Education Commissioner Dionne Wells-Hedrington when lawmakers pressed the

department on the next course of action following a [recent ruling by the Superior Court](#) on the instruction of Virgin Islands and Caribbean History (VICH) in public schools.?

Decades after Act 4844 was enacted in 1983, the Superior Court found that the V.I. Department of Education was not in compliance with the law's mandate to teach VICH territory-wide. While many Virgin Islanders were hoping that education officials would move quickly to follow the ruling, Ms. Wells-Hedrington's comment may be yet another stumbling block in the road to educate young Virgin Islanders about their history.

As Ms. Wells-Hedrington shared during [last week's appearance](#) before the Senate Committee on Budget, Appropriations and Finance, the department's reservations stem from the requirement "for there to be a standalone class for K through Eight, which requires additional personnel." It is no secret that the department struggles to maintain adequate staffing levels to deliver current instructional programming – a struggle with no immediate resolution in sight. Indeed, by September 2024, over 120 individuals in the Department of Education will qualify for retirement.?

With mounting concerns over the requirement for a standalone VICH class, Ms. Wells-Hedrington assured lawmakers that VIDE will "engage the Board [of Education] first, in conversation and then probably engage this body as well." The department hopes that the meetings will "make sure that we are meeting the needs of both the department as well as the mandate and the ruling issued by the judge."

The ruling does not allow for an integrated approach to VICH instruction, meaning the department will be unable to incorporate it into the Social Studies curriculum. "It's an independent course outside of the Social Studies curriculum that we have adopted," explained Ms. Wells-Hedrington. The department currently implements an integrated model, but for students in 9th through 12th grade "it's mandatory for them to take during the course of high school."?

Currently, VIDE incorporates references to the Virgin Islands in subjects including geography and social studies. "Sixth graders may go to South Pond. Fifth graders may do the the downtown tour. So those things are included in the curriculum," explained Stefan Jurgen, insular superintendent for the St. Thomas/St. John district.

Apart from incorporating the history of the Virgin Islands, important Virgin Islanders and notable landmarks in existing curricula, the VIDE has made little progress in advancing VICH as now required by law. Senator Donna Frett-Gregory questioned the progress of a series of V.I. History workbooks being designed for the territory by Dr. Lauren Larsen, St. Croix District Social Studies coordinator. She learned that workbooks have only been produced for students up to the 2nd grade.

"This work has been going on for a very, very long time," lamented Frett-Gregory, wondering who was supporting Dr. Larsen's efforts. VIDE said that the department is providing financial and human resource support, but the lawmaker nevertheless suggested that the slow pace of progress could be "where the frustration came from those [members in the community](#) who insisted that V.I history be taught in our schools." With a new school year just over a month away, the legislator was disappointed that "we have not completed the workbooks for the rest of the elementary school." Education officials anticipate that elementary level workbooks will be published by February 2025.?

"Please make this a priority. We don't have the vibe that it is a priority," Frett-Gregory admonished. "This is why this matter went as far as it went... We should have been way past this when that court case came. We should have been able to say we have all these things in place."

