

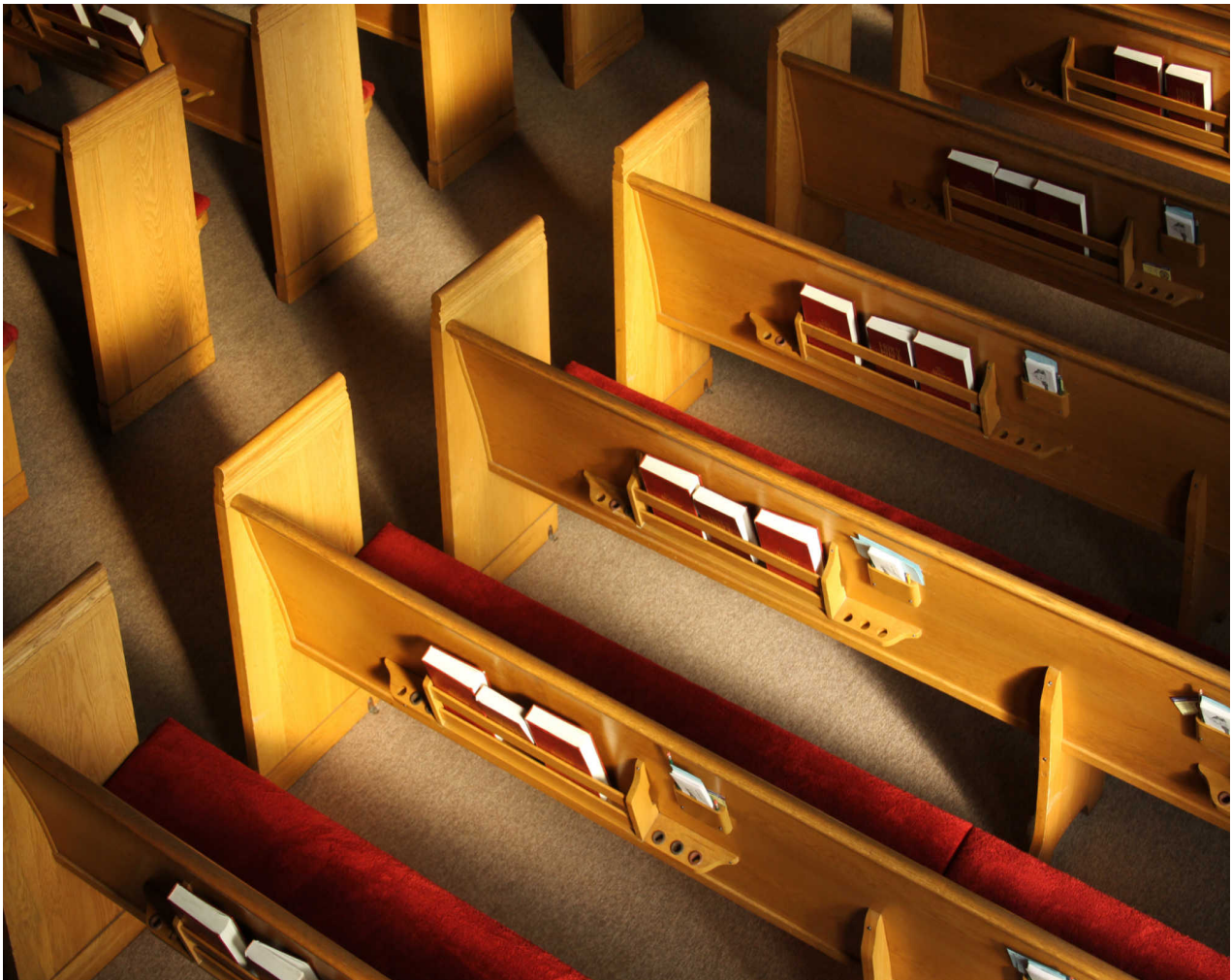
The Virgin Islands Consortium

Senator Carla Joseph Calls for Chaplains in Schools Amid Student Behavior Concerns; Violet Opposes, Citing Separation of Church and State

During an education committee meeting, Senator Joseph proposed bringing chaplains into schools to address behavioral challenges, while Senator Kurt Violet raised concerns about the separation of church and state.

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Nelcia Charlemagne **February 07, 2025**



During a discussion on student behavior and parental engagement with the Department of Education, Senator Carla Joseph firmly stated, “We need God in these schools.” Her remarks came during Wednesday’s Committee on Education and Workforce

Development meeting, where she questioned the V.I. Department of Education (VIDE) on its strategies to increase parental involvement.

Having visited an elementary school the day prior, Senator Joseph expressed deep concern about student and parent behavior. "I am not comfortable. [It] is unacceptable – the behavior of our young people and their parents. Their parents are acting out. They have issues... Learning cannot happen if we're having behavioral issues in a classroom," she lamented.

VIDE Commissioner Dionne Wells-Hedrington acknowledged these challenges. "We have some issues with parents and attendance. We have some issues with student behavior," she admitted. "Parent behavior on campuses has been inappropriate in some cases," she added. She urged parents to work closely with teachers and monitor their child's progress. "We still have to do a lot more outreach. We're not getting that group of parents who we really need to see," she said, noting that many parents do not attend school meetings unless it is made mandatory.

Recognizing the need for stronger intervention, VIDE has increased efforts to support both parents and students. Stefan Jurgen, insular superintendent for St. Thomas, informed lawmakers that the Department offers training on conflict resolution, mental health, substance abuse, suicide awareness, and bullying. "We also are having parenting training in the evening," he added.

Looking for solutions beyond traditional disciplinary measures, Senator Joseph proposed the introduction of chaplains into schools. "I do have a piece of legislation to bring chaplains – they could be volunteers or paid. This is something that's been instituted in the great state of Texas." Chaplains, commonly found in hospitals and the military, provide emotional and spiritual support regardless of religious affiliation.

However, Committee Chair Senator Kurt Vialet expressed reservations about Joseph's proposal, citing concerns over the separation of church and state. "You spoke to me about your idea, but we had a little disagreement in terms of separation of church and state," he said. He recalled an incident at the St. Croix Educational Complex where a student-led prayer group became a recurring issue, leading to interventions by the superintendent and education commissioner. "I had to stop the students...and so we need to have a discussion."

Instead of chaplain-led interventions, Vialet advocated for targeted strategies to address behavioral issues. "We need to discuss strategies as to how we could target the real population that we need to have there on a regular basis...we gotta do some drastic stuff in order to control the school," he concluded.