

Calls Grow for More Sensory Rooms as Autistic Students Face Inadequate Learning Spaces

Lawmakers urged VIDE to expand sensory rooms after Sen. Violet described classroom damage caused by students in crisis, stressing that padded walls could have prevented harm and questioning why proper spaces haven't been prioritized for autistic learners.

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Nelcia Charlemagne **May 10, 2025**

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As autism diagnoses among students in the U.S. Virgin Islands continue to rise, lawmakers on Friday questioned the V.I. Department of Education's slow pace in making sensory-friendly spaces widely available across the territory's public schools.

During a meeting of the Committee on Education and Workforce Development, senators heard from department officials and invited testifiers on the current state of special education services.

At the heart of the discussion was the issue of sensory rooms, dedicated spaces used as a therapeutic tool to help neurodivergent students—such as those with autism—manage sensory input and regulate behavior.

According to Assistant Commissioner Victor Somme III, only Juanita Gardine K-8 School on St. Croix currently has a dedicated sensory room. Smaller “sensory corners” have been created at Alfredo Andrews and Pearl B. Larsen schools.

“Given a rise in emotional and behavioral disorders...a sensory room [was] designed to provide that safe space in a therapeutic environment that fosters sensory regulation, emotional support and overall well-being for students,” said Mr. Somme.

He also acknowledged the broader goal. “The district wishes to have more sensory rooms in each school, or at least to have a sensory corner.”

In the St. Thomas/St. John district, Somme said the department has “taken initial steps to establish sensory environments” at Lockhart K-8 School and Yvonne E. Milliner Bowsky Elementary School. According to his testimony, VIDE has already procured “specialized sensory equipment and furnishings tailored to the unique needs of these students.” However, he admitted that “the full implementation of dedicated sensory rooms has been delayed due to space constraints at both campuses.”

“The current lack of designated rooms has hindered the district's ability to create comprehensive sensory environments,” Mr. Somme added.

That explanation raised concerns for Senator Carla Joseph, who asked for clarity. In response, Deputy Superintendent for the St. Thomas/St. John District Desha Powell laid the blame on infrastructure limitations. “I’m going to contact the Bureau [of School Maintenance and Construction] to find out what’s the limitations.”

Still, the department's fallback plan for using sensory corners rather than full rooms did not sit well with Senator Joseph. “Just tell the truth. The Bureau...has the rooms then and they ain't fixed? Just lay it out straight. Is that the case?” she asked.

Dr. Powell disagreed, stating that the issue wasn’t unused rooms but rather that “there were simply not enough rooms,” though Senator Joseph remained unconvinced.

“Why would you buy the equipment? You'd know you don't have no room. That doesn't sound like good planning,” she said. “I need to get a visual of what you're saying with a corner compared to a room. I don't know if we want to have our young people in a corner when you're looking at a room.”

Ellen Master, who oversees special education in the St. Thomas/St. John district, stepped in to clarify. “It's not a corner, but more of a space where a student can have that personalized attention.”

She was responding to Committee Chair Senator Kurt Vialet, who asked why a classroom of autistic students at Yvonne E. Milliner Bowsky Elementary School wasn’t converted into a full sensory room. “You had the one class that was all autistic students. Why didn't you just turn the whole class into a sensory room?”

Ms. Master explained why that approach could be problematic. “Having that whole entire classroom as a sensory room, where all of the students are in there trying to learn at that moment, could essentially be very disruptive to the other children...I would find it very rare that every single child in that room would need a sensory break input all at the same time.”

But Violet was not reassured. He described a visit to one classroom with serious physical damage. “We visited a classroom that had multiple holes in the trailer all across the room, and every single hole was caused by a student when they were having a crisis...Something as simple as just that room having padding across all the walls would have stopped the student from hurting himself or herself.”

In response, Powell pledged that the department would respond to the concerns. “We will take all your recommendations and suggestions, and we're going to go back and reassess how we can make it a more comprehensive space.” But she added a note of caution, stating that any improvements would have to be “within the parameters that we have.