

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Dept. of Education Shifts Special Ed Salaries to Local Budget as Federal Funding Uncertainty Grows

Amid fears of federal cuts, 41 special education staff were moved to local funding at a cost of \$2.7 million, leaving VIDE with a \$1.7 million personnel gap and \$3.6 million shortfall in services as the department navigates funding instability.

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Fearful of the impact on special education due to [changes in federal spending](#), the V.I. Department of Education has taken steps to ensure that the “majority” of its specialized workers are now paid from the local budget, according to Commissioner Dionne Wells-

Hedrington.

"We could not take the chance of our funding being taken and those teachers and paraprofessionals no longer being available to provide the services to our students," Wells-Hedrington explained to lawmakers on the Senate Committee on Education and Workforce Development on Friday. Forty-one (41) employees have been moved from the federal budget to the local budget with an associated cost of \$2.7 million in salaries and related expenses. VIDE is still relying on federal funding for "the maintenance of effort, which is a requirement of the U.S. Department of Education." With President Trump seeking to [dismantle the department](#), however, it is currently unclear how these funds will be administered in the future.

Much of the federal funding for special education was provided by the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) and special education grants. The latter, though still available, has been reduced from \$8.5 million to \$7.3 million due to a decrease in the number of students who qualify. VIDE, however, is behind on assessments and therefore anticipates petitioning for an increase in that grant soon.

Notwithstanding, the department must in the meantime take the necessary measures to fund special education services territory-wide. VIDE's approved budget for FY 2024/2025 allocated \$4.7 million for the St. Croix District and \$4.8 million for the St. Thomas/St. John District for special education. These funds are expected to cover salaries, supplies, and other costs. "When we moved the personnel over, it took up a lot of the money, and we still are \$1.7 million short," Wells-Hedrington told Sen. Kurt Vialet, the committee's chair.

"That was not calculated in the budget so you had to find it from various areas, right?" posed Mr. Vialet. "And you're planning for that upcoming [budget]?" Wells-Hedrington replied in the affirmative. "We had to make the adjustments in personnel. For example, the special education personnel. Now, our budget for other services and other things is in the negative."

Sympathetic to their plight, the Office of Management and Budget has given VIDE an "additional amount for our ceiling." Still, the Department of Education remains "\$1.7 million short in personnel, and \$3.6 million in services," the education commissioner disclosed.

"The issue I have with the employees going from the federal budget back to the local budget is that they were once on the local budget," Vialet remarked. "Then, OMB took all of them off of the local budget and put it on the federal budget, and then used those monies for something else. It behooves me as to how we have all of these issues."

He added, "The department has become too big in non-teaching and non-school-based positions, and that's a personal view of mine." As VIDE must now become creative to find millions of dollars in new funding, he has encouraged them to "freeze hiring any administrators for the next couple years."