

The Virgin Islands Consortium

School Security Bureau Bill Held in Committee After Widespread Opposition from Stakeholders

A bill to establish a Bureau of School Security was held after nearly all testifiers—including the Department of Education—raised concerns over costs, overlapping roles, mental health needs, and the risks of over-policing public school campuses.

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Legislation proposing to establish a Bureau of School Security was held in the Committee on Education and Workforce Development on Tuesday, after nearly every testifier opposed the bill. That included the Department of Education, whom the bill's sponsor, Senator Novelle Francis, said had asked for the bureau in the first place.

Ten pages long, [Bill 36-0049](#) establishes the Bureau within the Department of Education and assigns existing school resource officers, school monitors, school investigators and truancy officers to the bureau. The bill outlines strict training requirements, including a range of courses and instruction in child and adolescent development, psychology, and de-escalation techniques, among others. Refresher courses are also mandated. Among the recommended policies is to ensure that “at least one armed School Resource Officer is on-site at each public school at all times.”

“In 2022, I was approached by a representative of the Virgin Islands Department of Education. This proposal outlined the transfer of the Bureau of School Security from the Police Department to the V.I. Department of Education,” Senator Francis said, explaining the genesis of the draft legislation.

On Tuesday, however, VIDE representatives said that they remain hesitant, despite acknowledging the proposal as proactive. Assistant Commissioner Victor Somme III pointed out that “the proposed legislation does not identify funding for the Bureau,” and VIDE “does not have any general or federal funds to support” requirements such as the robust training outlined in the bill. The department's ability to offer attractive salaries for bureau employees is also in question, he said.

Gleston McIntosh Jr., executive director of the Peace Officer Standard and Training Council (POST), did not support the bill either. Such a move, he said, “is not necessary currently.” Instead, he suggested “strengthening the existing structures, enhancing training and coordination and ensuring clear distinction between educational and law enforcement responsibilities.” Mr. McIntosh encouraged lawmakers to “protect the integrity of our schools as safe and supportive learning environments.”

So too did Emmanuella Perez-Cassius, vice chair of the V.I. Board of Education. One of the proposals she opposed was the installation of an armed officer at each public school. “According to the United States Department of Education Office of Civil Rights 2021, students in school with law enforcement officers are three times more likely to be arrested than those without,” she said. “Let us reject fear-based responses and instead embrace innovative, evidence-based strategies that uplift all students,” she urged. She proposed investment in mental health support and community engagement as an alternative.

Sean Santos, assistant commissioner for the VIPD, joined the chorus of testifiers who supported the intent of the bill but not its form. “The approach outlined in this bill may not be the most practical, efficient or sustainable path forward,” he stated. Mr. Santos estimated that establishing the Bureau could “exceed over \$5 million, with recurring annual costs in the millions.” He insisted that those resources could instead be utilized to “enhance existing school safety efforts, such as implementing a robust camera monitoring system and support educational programs focused on conflict resolution.” He offered an alternative, whereby qualifying school monitors could participate in VIPD’s auxiliary program, allowing them to become Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST) certified and “capable of carrying out law enforcement functions under VIPD supervision while remaining embedded in the school system.”

Support for the draft legislation came from two school monitors who focused solely on the portion of the bill that made provisions for the awarding of hazard pay.

Lawmakers, like the invited testifiers, supported the rationale of bolstering school safety but harbored reservations over the potential red tape that spinning up an entirely new bureaucratic structure could create. Many, including Senators Carla Joseph and Marise James, used their allotted time to discuss mental health interventions and conflict resolution for students. “I just want us to shift the focus from enforcement to restorative behavior,” said Sen. James. “We just need to, as a community, find a way to become a community of more peaceful resolution of problems than focusing on law enforcement.”

Committee chair Senator Kurt Vialet agreed. “The school system is presently dealing with students who have deep-rooted issues as a result of severe trauma,” he noted. “The bigger issue really is how we going to fix out here?”

“For various reasons, I don't support the measure,” stated Senator Kenneth Gittens. He asserted that the bill has “duplicative law enforcement functions” with the possibility of causing “fragmentation.” He called the hiring policies “restrictive.” Gittens was strongly opposed to “making an academic atmosphere... into a police state. I don't like the appearance, and I think it sends the wrong message.”

“What we need to do is put our foot down, just like we do in our households,” said Sen. Gittens.

“I want to thank the sponsor for bringing the bill forward. It's aggressive...but at the same time there have to be a balanced approach,” suggested Senator Marvin Blyden.

“I think it sends the wrong message to our community,” added Senator Dwayne DeGraff. “We're going to flood our schools with police and stuff, and eventually, they gonna have batons, and eventually they're gonna have a gun.”

Ultimately, a unanimous decision was made to hold the bill in committee pending further review. For Senator Novelle Francis, it was “mission accomplished.” “My heart is filled today, because this bill has done exactly what I wanted it to do: Have that thought-provoking discussion about what's happening in our schools and how we work collectively to address it.”