

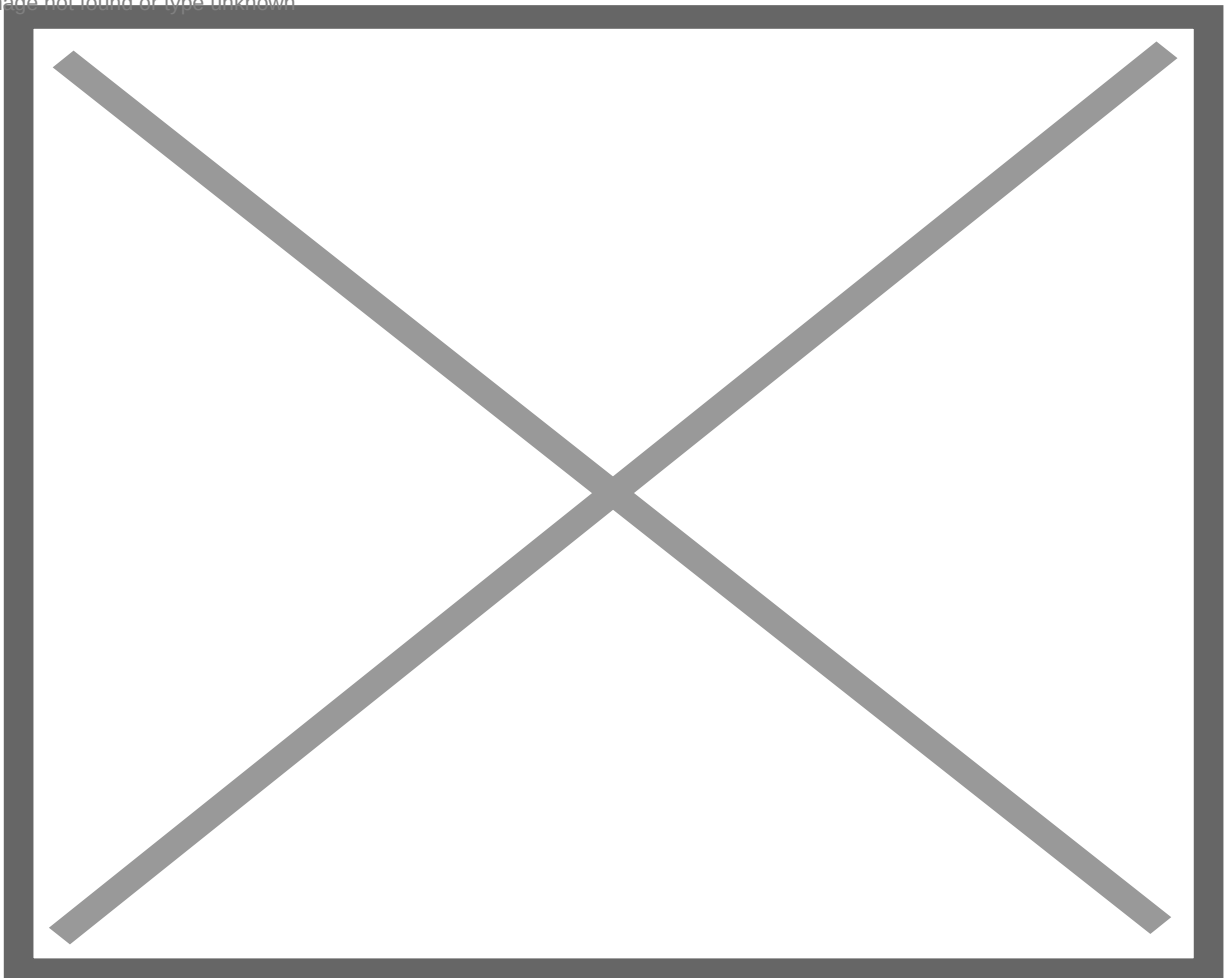
Cuts to Sports, STEM, and Student Programs Draw Backlash as Education Department Budget Rises to Offset Federal Shortfalls

VIDE's \$179M budget request aims to offset expiring federal support and rising costs, yet includes cuts to student sports and STEM programs, prompting concern over how the territory will maintain enrichment opportunities under local-only funding.

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A decision by the V.I. Department of Education to shift several federally funded positions back to the general fund has inflated its FY2026 budget by 5.04%, said Commissioner Dionne Wells-Hedrington on Monday.

The commissioner was testifying before the Senate Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance in support of VIDE's \$179,316,999 general fund budget request. That sum includes \$108,276,622 for personnel costs and an additional \$54,845,776 for fringe benefits, which altogether reflect a \$5,698,095 increase over last year's allocation. The increase is attributed to a "strategic decision to transition vital school-based positions from the federal funding sources to local appropriations, combined with the ongoing implementation and sustainment of collectively bargain salary increases," Wells-Hedrington told lawmakers.

According to the education commissioner, such a "proactive" measure was taken to "ensure the continuity of essential educational services and to mitigate risks associated with the increasing uncertainty of federal grant allocations." VIDE has been informed of the restoration of access to some \$34 million in grant funding, but "is seeking guidance in terms of the drawdown."

That decision has also affected the amount budgeted for supplies. That category increased by a whopping 83.25% for a total of \$1,413,791, "largely driven by crucial investments in data processing software, which accounts for \$367,472 of the total increase," Wells-Hedrington explained. She testified that "a significant portion" of supply expenses had been budgeted against the now-expired American Rescue Plan Act grant. Now, "these unavoidable and reoccurring operational expenses must now be absorbed by local appropriations."

"The anticipated return of these previously federally covered costs into the general fund budget remains a continuing concern," Wells-Hedrington admitted. She advised lawmakers that VIDE "will require additional local support to fully offset these essential expenditures, including potential contributions from the casino funds."

The remainder of VIDE's general fund includes \$7,500,000 for utilities and \$7,281,110 for other services. Wells-Hedrington sought to account for a "dramatic increase of rental of land/ building to \$576,510 from \$53,055 reflecting a nearly 987% increase," despite an overall decrease in the "other services" category. The return of rental cars, previously federally funded, to the general fund is the reason for this "substantial investment," she indicated.

No funds have been allocated to VIDE's miscellaneous category, a 100% decrease from last year's \$230,000 budget. "This complete elimination of funding for miscellaneous categories is a direct consequence of the necessary prioritization of essential and mandatory operational costs," Commissioner Wells-Hedrington explained. "It underscores the challenging trade-offs required to maintain core educational services with fiscal constraints."

"This is a very tough budget because when you add 5% on a situation that's already difficult, \$8.6 million is a lot. It becomes permanent. We assume federal debt, and so we have to dig somewhere in this book to see where we're going to sustain that," remarked Senator Hubert Frederick.

Despite VIDE's expanded budget, funding for certain activities has been reduced, prompting disapproval by lawmakers. "Funding for interscholastic sports and STEM were cut for 2026. That disturbs me," remarked Senator Angel Bolques Jr. According to Wells-Hedrington, VIDE will "continue our efforts to make sure that our EDC companies are contributing to the department the way that they should."

Senator Kurt Vialet, too, was "very concerned" about the targeted reductions. "What is going to happen to sports in the territory in terms of tournaments, in terms of inter-island participation? What is the plan for that?" he asked. Calling it a "valid point", the education commissioner said conversations with the Office of Management and Budget continue. In the event those talks aren't fruitful, VIDE will be "limiting the amount of travel and competitions that our students can

participate in.”

Previous responses did not satisfy Senator Milton Potter. “How do you justify eliminating programs that impact hundreds of students for such minimal savings...like 1.3% of your overall budget?” he wondered.

“The department does not want to eliminate any programs. We just don't have the funding to offset that cost,” Wells-Hedrington replied. However, Potter considers that type of programming to be much more than an “add-on”. “I see it as really fundamental to educating our kids...Those types of programs really lead to increased retention... I think just from a cost-benefit analysis, it just seems to me to be something that should be a greater priority,” he argued.

Wells-Hedrington has assured that “we have an opportunity to do some budget markups. Those are conversations that we are having with the Office of Management and Budget.”