

Lawmakers and VIDE Push for Stronger Enforcement of School Attendance Amid Warnings of Neglect

Lawmakers pressed the Department of Education to treat chronic absenteeism among young students as child neglect, urging stronger enforcement of compulsory education laws and accountability for parents who fail to get children into the classroom.

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Chronic absenteeism among the territory's youngest students has reignited calls for tougher enforcement of compulsory education laws, with education officials and lawmakers warning parents that keeping children out of school without cause amounts to child neglect.

The Department of Education has repeatedly raised concerns about alarmingly low attendance rates in early grades, where children are most dependent on parents and guardians for access to the

classroom. “Those students can’t dress themselves. They can’t feed themselves. They can’t transport themselves,” said Victor Somme III, assistant commissioner at VIDE, underscoring the responsibility of caregivers.

Senator Kenneth Gittens expressed alarm at the persistence of the attendance gap and questioned whether the Departments of Education, Human Services, and Justice were working together on the problem. He stressed the importance of accountability, saying parents who keep children at home without justification should face consequences.

Mr. Somme confirmed that VIDE is engaged in discussions with the other agencies to review the compulsory attendance law, and expects amendments to be introduced in the Legislature once Senator Angel Bolques Jr., currently suspended, returns to duty. In the meantime, attendance counselors are conducting home visits and requesting Human Services’ involvement when necessary.

Gittens urged even stronger measures, suggesting the V.I. Police Department be brought into enforcement through its School Security Bureau or Youth Investigation Bureau. Recalling his law enforcement career, he said that when parents ignored three consecutive school notices, he would request a warrant in their name. “They have a responsibility to get these children to school...We need to start looking closely into this,” he said.

Senator Kurt Vialet, who chaired the committee meeting, called for decisive action. “The first child neglect case that we file [with] Human Services for not sending the children to school, then you’ll see an improvement,” he told Somme. He argued that cases of chronic truancy among young children must be treated as neglect. “We really need to get serious about those types of cases where we’re going to mandate that it’s not okay to leave your child at home,” he added.

Vialet also linked absenteeism directly to poor academic performance. “You can’t teach who isn’t there,” he said, emphasizing that low test scores are often unfairly blamed on teachers and the Department of Education rather than on systemic attendance issues.

The Virgin Islands Board of Education has also been included in the discussions. Vice-chair Emmanuella Perez Cassius reminded parents that the requirement is not optional. “Every child has to be in school, underneath the United States law, between the ages of five and eighteen,” she said.

Senator Novelle Francis called the issue one of enforcement. “We already have something on the books that we should be holding individuals accountable for, so I’m hoping we can make some inroads there,” he said.