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Technical College Bill Held in Committee After Significant Concerns Surface

The measure was held in committee as senators weighed testimony praising its workforce potential against concerns over board expansion, instructor shortages, accreditation issues, and unclear integration with current educational structures.

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Lawmakers spent Wednesday weighing the promise and challenges of Bill 36-0188, a proposal to establish the V.I. Technical College, during a lengthy hearing of the Committee on Education and Workforce Development. The measure drew both support and deep scrutiny, with senators, educators, and board officials acknowledging the need for expanded workforce training while raising significant questions about governance, staffing, curriculum alignment, and the impact on existing institutions.

Bill sponsor Senator Avery Lewis opened the hearing by describing the measure as a “promise that opportunity will be found right here at home, not somewhere far away.” With billions of dollars in reconstruction work ahead, he said the territory must prepare local workers to meet tight federal timelines, framing the proposed Technical College as a “bridge to employment.” Sen. Lewis said the institution would provide “hands on experience and exact skills employers are searching for,” with campuses in both districts operating out of the St. Croix Career and Technical Education Center and the Raphael O. Wheatley Skill Center.

According to Sen. Lewis’s presentation, the College would offer “stackable credentials, dual enrollment for high school students and training in fields like healthcare, construction, technology, marine trades, education and renewable energy.” Early testimony included support from multiple stakeholders. Assistant Commissioner Victor Somme III of the Department of Education said the measure “aligns directly with the department's key objectives of increasing career and technical education,” expressing confidence that it would “transform our entire educational system.”

However, the V.I. Board of Education voiced substantial reservations. While supportive of the bill’s intent, the Board cited “significant concerns about the proposed implementation framework.” One provision expands the Career and Technical Education Board to 14 members, including 11 voting members. Board chair Joann Murphy welcomed the increase, stating that the additional members would “play a crucial role in supporting the Technical College’s growth.” But VIBE chair Dr. Kyza Callwood disagreed, arguing that the Board “has not been largely effective, and lacks meaningful operational infrastructure.” He said it “continues to struggle with attracting qualified instructors and navigating the complex educational regulatory system,” adding, “Frankly, our students deserve better than this inadequate and insubstantial framework, which we believe is unlikely to achieve the stated goals.”

Callwood further criticized the lack of “clear parameters for how Technical College programs will align with K-12 graduation requirements, dual enrollment pathways or broader curriculum standards,” noting that the bill does not “explicitly include the Board of Education in this collaboration or define how that coordination would occur.” He said the measure “sets ambitious objectives” but does not address “how technical education will fit into the broader educational system,” or how “operational responsibilities and academic integration will be managed.” He warned that the bill “spreads already limited resources too thin,” and said VIBE would “prefer to see resources focus on strengthening current programs, including the ability to hire and compensate instructors at competitive wages.” Concerns about accreditation and pathways for dual enrollment students were also raised.

Committee members echoed some of these issues. Senator Kurt Vialet said there were “some areas that I think need to tweak,” calling the proposal a “wonderful concept” that must be further developed to “really make it work.” Bill 36-0188 also introduces a chancellor for the new College, a move that would eliminate leadership positions at existing technical education facilities. The bill does not specify qualifications for that role. When asked for her reaction, St. Croix Career and Technical Education Center principal Chrisa-Ann Malloy responded, “I'm very strong in my faith, and I don't let a lot of other things stress me that I have no control over,” adding, “All I ask is that whatever happens next, be fair to the teachers.” Sen. Vialet stressed the need for protections, saying, “I can't pass legislation and it's going to affect a group of people, and the protections aren't in there.”

Union implications also emerged as a major sticking point. Testifiers warned that teachers would have to join new unions “because they will be a higher education institution.” Sana Joseph Smith, Policy Advisor for Education, Workforce, and Labor at the Office of the Governor, explained that

“if they choose to have a union, it will be a separate union” within the American Federation of Teachers. Senator Carla Joseph expressed concern, saying, “I think maybe fundamentally, that's union busting,” referencing tactics that discourage workers from joining unions. Senator Marvin Blyden agreed, and also stressed the importance of maintaining options for community members who want technical skills training without pursuing an associate’s degree through a college. While he called the idea of establishing the Technical College “fine,” he encouraged stakeholders to “focus on what we have right now.”

Following hours of discussion, Senator Lewis agreed to hold the measure so it may be further refined before returning to the Committee on Education and Workforce Development in the 36th Legislature.

Despite the concerns raised, Bill 36-0188 also saw strong support from organizations such as the University of the Virgin Islands and from students themselves. Among them was Israel Popo, a St. Croix Central High School and St. Croix Career & Technical Education Center student and aspiring welder, who testified that the Technical College would offer students like him “a clear, affordable path to certifications and advanced skills...so that we can stay home, work and become contributing members of our community and its growth.”