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## Absenteeism Remains High as CAHS Averages 67 Absent Daily, CHS 75; “We Have a Big Problem,” Commissioner Says

Officials said some parents allow students to stay home when they ask and families schedule cruises during the school year, prompting Sen. Avery Lewis to suggest harsh enforcement measures, including cutting government benefits.

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CAHS, where education officials reported an average of 67 students absent each school day, a figure cited during legislative testimony as part of growing concerns over chronic absenteeism across V.I. public schools.

The V.I. Department of Education (VIDE) is making an impassioned plea to lawmakers, parents, and the wider community to address chronic absenteeism in the territory's schools.

It is not the first time that Education Commissioner Dionne Wells-Hedrington has raised this issue before the Legislature. She [promised a crackdown on truancy in 2024](#), while the following year lawmakers urged the Department of Education to [treat chronic absenteeism as child neglect](#). Last November's Kid's Count report showed that the rate of absenteeism across the territory has fallen, but at 23% overall and still [worryingly high on St. Croix](#), the situation seems to have reached a boiling point for the commissioner.

Attendance summaries reveal a "troubling trend of increasing daily absences across both districts" in the last school year. "We have a big problem," Commissioner Wells-Hedrington declared. On an average day, 67 students are absent from the Charlotte Amalie High School, while 75 are absent from the St. Croix Central High School on an average day. Elementary school numbers are also troubling. On average, 42 students are absent from the Bertha C. Boschulte School daily.

Missing "critical days of instruction" is widening the performance gap, Wells-Hedrington said.

She informed the Committee on Education and Workforce Development that there are instances where families "plan cruises during the school year" or take other off-island trips. VIDE is also aware of instances where students express not wanting to attend school and "the parents are flexible enough to say stay home."

Despite outreach efforts by the school, the absenteeism challenge persists. "Every time we may take a step forward we're taking 10 steps back," the commissioner lamented.

Wells-Hedrington says she has reviewed truancy legislation and has identified opportunities for stronger enforcement. According to [existing law](#), "parents can be penalized \$100 for truancy," she noted. Combating absenteeism will require "all hands on deck," she advised.

"We gotta change this trajectory, or else, years later, we'll be complaining about an illiterate society that [the Department of] Education failed," Dr. Wells-Hedrington warned.

"I think that in most instances, our parents really don't take the education seriously," noted Symbra Brown-Gumbs, acting superintendent in the St. Thomas/St. John district. Parents, she said, assume that missing one day "wouldn't affect their children."

As with other recent discussions on truancy, lawmakers were disturbed. "That's very concerning to me," said Senator Marvin Blyden.

VIDE, Wells-Hedrington explained, is exploring "creative activities" to essentially incentivize students to attend school regularly. In an unnamed secondary school on St. Thomas, an attendance competition was held and students were rewarded with baked goods.

Senator Kurt Vialet, the committee's chair and a former educator, noted that the need to offer incentives for attendance is a "sad commentary on this community."

Senator Avery Lewis was equally disturbed. He suggested the need for "draconian measures." He used the example of parents who access government benefits, suggesting that "we may have to cut these benefits if these children don't start coming to school."

He learned that VIDE does not currently employ a truancy officer, though 11 attendance counselors work with school resource officers as their enforcement arm.

Sen. Lewis suggested that the Legislature could explore avenues to “put some laws and teeth behind that,” echoing discussions on absenteeism from previous years. Commissioner Wells-Hedrington embraced that suggestion. “I do like that,” she said.

“Hearing those absenteeism numbers gave me a headache,” said Senator Novelle Francis, joining the conversation. He told the VIDE team that he remains “equally concerned about the criminal activity behavior.” Mr. Francis suggested that VIDE engage the University of the Virgin Islands on additional data analysis.

“We really have to take a stand,” he declared, expressing fear that the situation would only become worse if left unaddressed.

Senator Marise James was also deeply disturbed. She seemed bewildered that some parents would willingly allow their students to remain home from school. “We have parents today that are much younger and are not parenting the way that they should,” Commissioner Wells-Hedrington said. She repeated her plea for the Legislature to give VIDE an avenue to “really hold these parents' feet to the fire.”

According to Sen. Vialet, such an avenue already exists. In 2015, he introduced legislation establishing a [daytime curfew for school-aged children](#), requiring that they be in school during the required hours.

The community, he said, must play a more involved role in sounding the alarm when children are seen outside of school when they are required to be.

“We have become so accustomed, and have normalized bad behavior for such a long time, that it now is a norm,” he said, rounding out Thursday’s discussion.