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K-12 Mental Health Education Bill Advances as Doubts Linger Over Education's Ability to Execute

Bill 36-0133 would require age-appropriate mental health education from kindergarten through 12th grade, with VIDE and DOH supporting the measure as senators questioned funding, teacher training, and the department's ability to implement it.

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The St. Croix Educational Complex High School campus. By. V.I. CONSORTIUM.

Lawmakers advanced a proposal requiring mental health education across all grade levels in Virgin Islands schools, even as several members raised concerns about whether the Department of Education can successfully implement another legislative mandate.

Bill No. 36-0133, sponsored by Senator Milton Potter, was approved Wednesday by the Committee on Education and Workforce Development and now moves to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary. The measure targets students from kindergarten through 12th grade, ensuring they receive “age appropriate learning activities that help them understand mental wellness, build resilience, develop coping skills, strengthen their self esteem and form healthy relationships.”

According to Senator Potter, the bill is “preventive in nature” and “does not wait until a child is in crisis.”

“This measure is not about adding another burden to our schools,” Mr. Potter emphasized. Instead, he described the legislation as a framework to support teachers who are already observing mental health-related issues in the classroom.

The bill follows an [earlier version](#) introduced in 2022 that was held because of concerns from the Virgin Islands Department of Education. This time, however, the measure received support from both VIDE and the Department of Health.

Presenting joint testimony on behalf of the two departments, VIDE Assistant Commissioner Victor Somme III said mental health education is “beneficial to our students’ social-emotional and mental wellness.” He also agreed that awareness through education is the “first stop to reduce the stigmas attached to mental illness.”

Integrating age-appropriate behavioral health education across grade levels would “support a proactive, prevention-focused approach that benefits children, families, and communities,” Mr. Somme testified.

He said the Behavioral Health Division at the Department of Health is “prepared to support implementation through training, technical assistance, and capacity building for educators and school personnel.”

Lawmakers were told that DOH and VIDE have historically collaborated on mental health training and awareness within the public school system. As a result, the mandate in Bill No. 36-0133 was presented as an expansion of existing education, rather than the creation of a standalone course. Stakeholders agreed that mental health education would be incorporated into existing learning programs, including the Social Emotional Learning block.

While VIDE and DOH described the bill as an easy but necessary step, lawmakers questioned whether the department would be able to carry it out, especially given previous struggles with implementing legislative mandates.

Senator Avery Lewis was among those who raised that concern. “A lot of times we pass these things and we don’t provide the avenues and things so it could be implemented properly,” he stated. He encouraged VIDE to review existing mandates to determine which ones are not yet being implemented.

Addressing potential barriers, Mr. Somme said, “it would require money in the sense that we would have to train teachers and other subject areas on how to deliver instruction on mental health and wellness education.”

Senator Carla Joseph also expressed concern about execution, suggesting that at times, entities lack the “same diligence and drive to implement.” Still, she praised the intent of the bill and pressed VIDE and DOH on how they would ensure its success.

Beyond implementation, lawmakers also focused on the availability of mental health support services outside the school system. Several questioned whether students who learn to identify mental health challenges in themselves, their families, or their communities will have adequate places to turn for help.

Senator Kurt Violet, the committee's chair, voiced frustration over what he described as insufficient emphasis on mental health support in the territory. "How are we directly impacting individuals who have mental health issues?" he asked. "We get them more education, and they complain more, and then they see the same thing over and over and over, and there's no change."

Senator Franklin Johnson agreed, pointing to the need to close that gap. He referenced inadequate facilities and noted that individuals with severe mental health challenges often prefer to remain on the street.

Ultimately, stakeholders agreed that a multi-layered approach is needed to ensure mental health awareness and support are available across the territory. Senator Potter assured lawmakers that Bill No. 36-0133 is not intended to be a "magic bullet," but rather another "tool." Many such tools, he noted, have been passed by the Legislature before.

Bill No. 36-0133 now advances to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary.