

Chronic Absenteeism Hits 53.8% at Alfredo Andrews; 601 Students Have Already Missed Five Days

Just 18 teaching days into the school year, 601 students have already missed at least five days, while chronic absenteeism has reached 53.8% at Alfredo Andrews Elementary. Lawmakers are weighing stricter enforcement, including automatic failure rules.

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Just 18 teaching days into the new academic year, 601 Virgin Islands public school students have already missed at least five days of school, while chronic absenteeism at one St. Croix elementary school has reached 53.8 percent, prompting Education officials to warn of a “serious attendance issue” that is already threatening students’ academic performance.

The highest chronic absenteeism rate reported in the St. Thomas-St. John District is 32.6 percent at Yvonne E. Milliner-Bowsky Elementary School. On St. Croix, Alfredo Andrews Elementary School has reached 53.8 percent.

Andrea Shillingford, assistant superintendent in the St. Croix District, illustrated the scale of the problem Wednesday before the Committee on Education and Workforce Development.

“We are on the 18th day of school, and at one particular school, we have 33 students that are already chronically absent,” she said.

Education Commissioner Dionne Wells-Hedrington said the numbers represent a “serious attendance issue,” despite a range of interventions VIDE says are already underway across the territory. Schools track attendance, contact parents and attempt to address barriers that may prevent families from getting children to school each day. In more severe cases, Education officials conduct home visits to determine why students are repeatedly absent.

The department has gone as far as providing meals, purchasing uniforms and washing students’ clothes when families cannot provide those necessities. Yet the attendance problem persists.

Ms. Wells-Hedrington warned that every missed day means lost instructional time and said the “academic gap is just going to continue to widen.”

She recalled one student in a previous school year who missed approximately 70 days.

“Could you imagine missing 70 days at school? How does a child recover from 70 days absent?” the commissioner asked.

Ms. Wells-Hedrington also pushed back against placing responsibility for poor student performance solely on teachers “when we got an attendance crisis on our hands.”

St. Croix District Superintendent Carla Bastian-Knight said VIDE can see the relationship between attendance and academic performance in student data.

“We’re able to look at those students that we’re tracking with their attendance and look at their testing data...and you can see that that child has missed a lot of days from school, and it’s our expectation that they won’t do well because they’re not there for instruction,” she said.

VIDE is seeking a broader response involving the Departments of Human Services and Justice, the Legislature and other entities. Lawmakers agreed that the scale of the problem requires action beyond the classroom.

Senator Franklin Johnson said he was “shocked” by the figures and warned that chronic absenteeism could eventually translate into higher dropout numbers as students fall farther behind.

“When students cannot compete, they’re gonna be shamed,” Sen. Johnson said.

Senator Carla Joseph also raised concerns about the relationship between chronic absenteeism and behavioral problems, while Ms. Wells-Hedrington said Education needs “more teeth when it comes to holding our parents accountable.”

Senator Kenneth Gittens, a former police officer, encouraged VIDE to work more closely with the V.I. Police Department. Truancy officer positions that have remained vacant for some time were

removed from VIDE's proposed FY 2027 budget.

601 Students Have Already Missed Five Days

The discussion became more pointed when Senator Kurt Vialet raised an existing Board of Education policy stating that five or more unexcused absences result in automatic failure.

Ms. Bastian-Knight indicated that enforcing such a rule under current attendance patterns could have sweeping consequences.

"601 is our number of students who have missed five days so far for the school year," she said.

Sen. Vialet argued that the territory cannot maintain compulsory-attendance rules while repeatedly promoting students who miss substantial portions of the school year.

"At some point, we're going to have to implement the rules of the Virgin Islands because what really happening, right, is that you could be in second grade and miss 40 days and still be promoted to third grade," he said.

"Once that begins to happen, parents are going to wake up," Sen. Vialet added.

Senator Dwayne DeGraff took an even firmer position.

"They don't show up? Fail them. Period. Move on," he said.

Existing Virgin Islands law already provides another enforcement mechanism. Legislation passed by Senator Novelle Francis Jr. during the 34th Legislature authorizes district superintendents to file a truancy complaint with the Family Division of Superior Court when a student records seven unexcused absences in a calendar month or 10 during an academic year.

Sen. Francis acknowledged Wednesday that absenteeism can stem from "some deeper-rooted concerns" but said he remains open to strengthening the law.

"We really need to ensure that there is some enforcement and at least hold parents accountable for this," he said.

Another compulsory school-attendance law provides for a \$25 penalty. Assistant Commissioner Victor Somme III suggested that amount is too low, while Ms. Bastian-Knight said VIDE is unclear which entity is responsible for collecting it.

Sen. Vialet promised to "revisit that particular law."

Summer School Will No Longer Be Free

VIDE is also attempting to use financial consequences to encourage regular attendance during the school year.

"This academic year, everybody will be paying for summer school," Ms. Wells-Hedrington said.

The department hopes requiring families to pay for summer instruction will encourage parents to ensure students attend regularly during the normal school year and avoid falling behind.

VIDE previously told lawmakers that absenteeism was particularly prevalent among students in the lower grades. Ms. Wells-Hedrington said Wednesday that the problem now extends to fourth- and fifth-grade students as well as high school students.

“While I do empathize with hardships that our parents may be experiencing, our children need to be in school,” the commissioner said.

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