

The Virgin Islands Consortium

At Hearing Discussing Single-Gender Classroom Bill, Gittens Says Same-Sex Relationships Are Prevalent In Local Schools

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ST. CROIX -- At a hearing in the Committee of Workforce Development and Education, a measure sponsored by Senator Nereida Rivera-O'Reilly that seeks to give parents the option of having their students learn in single-gender classrooms, Senator Kenneth Gittens said while he was leaning towards the idea and would most likely support the measure, same-sex relationships were now sweeping the territory's schools. The senator gave no explanation for his sudden rant against same-sex relationships, although it suggested that Mr. Gittens was concerned that single-gender classrooms might lead to more of those relationships.

"Look at the world we are living in today. It seems like we've lost principles, we've lost love, and all the good things as to why I termed it of us living in a confused world," Mr. Gittens said at the Fritz Lawaetz Legislative Hall in Frederiksted on Wednesday. "I sat there and I'm going to be honest, I didn't want to be a part of creating an atmosphere to continue to promote same-sex relationships et cetera, and we're seeing that in our high schools especially now throughout the territory."

He added: "I mean, this thing came in here like a whirlwind, and it's gone beyond. These are true discussions, it is happening right here at home. At one time we saw this as we traveled, we saw this on television and now it is right here at home."

"However, as a public official, my responsibility is to do the proper research and do what is best to make a decision for what I truly believe is best for our students," he said. "Maybe we could allow for the Board of Education to provide for the Department of Education to offer this single-gender classroom and schools within the territory, as long as the options are voluntary."

Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly said the measure was birthed "as a result of me not seeing enough traction in the public school system to use single-gender instruction as an intervention tool." She then gave background on single-gender education, stating that the practice was common in the U.S. until the 19th Century, and was on the rise again.

"About 400 public schools now offer some type of single-gender education," she said, stressing that the program is not a requirement, but rather an option for students. She said single-sex education enhances student success when it is coupled with teachers that use techniques that are geared to that student's gender.

"Research also suggest that single-gender education can broaden the educational prospects for both genders, because coed schools reinforce gender stereotypes and single-gender schools breakdown those stereotypes," Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly said.

Education officials said the department is nowhere close to implementing the program on a full scale basis, which would indeed be mandated through legislation. But D.O.E. can and has tried the program, the last time being 3-4 years ago at the six grade level at a certain school, according to María Encarnacion, a former St. Croix superintendent who now serves at D.O.E. as director of curriculum and instruction.

Responding to comments posed by Senator Tregenza Roach, Ms. Encarnacion said there was no prior training for teachers, and that parents were very involved in the program. She said D.O.E. could look at data collected from the brief program and put it to use if Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly's measure is signed into law. Asked if the program could be replicated on a secondary level, Ms. Encarnacion said, "where there's a will, there's a way."

"As it stands now, the teachers have the freedom to organize gender classrooms in a particular area if they think it would help students," said Alvincent Hudson, D.O.E.'s legal counsel. "It's called team teaching. But if you want it to be a program to take place throughout the system, then it would have to be legislated."

Mr. Hudson said VI Code Title 17, allows D.O.E. to create single-gender classrooms, albeit experimentally.

Avery Lewis, president of the St. Thomas-St. John Federation of Teachers, said while he had not researched fully the program, he would not oppose any measure that promotes education and better student results. But he said proper training and development would be necessary.

Mr. Lewis, who recently returned from a convention in Minneapolis, Minnesota, where one of the biggest conversations was focused on the Lesbian, Gays, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) community, said considerations for said community must be a focus moving forward.

"That's becoming a popular topic," he said. "So training the teachers in order to be sensitive... to be ready to deal with certain situations in the classroom so you don't violate anyone's rights -- it would be the best approach for proper training in order to implement such a program."

But for Mr. Lewis, while the idea of single-gender classrooms is commendable, "we need better salaries on top the table," he said, adding that salary increases remain one of the most pressing issues for teachers.