

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Bill Seeking To Implement Single-Sex Education In USVI To Be Heard Wednesday

Education / **Published On June 13, 2017 10:57 AM /**

Ernice Gilbert **June 13, 2017**



A bill sponsored by Senator Nereida Rivera-O'Reilly, to be heard in the Committee on Education, Youth and Recreation on Wednesday, seeks the implementation of single-gender education in the territory's public schools, to be executed by the Virgin Islands Board of Education and the commissioner of the Department of Education.

Single-sex education was common in the United States until the 19th century, when it fell into deep disfavor except in private or parochial schools. But the program is on the rise again in public schools as educators seek ways to improve academic performance, especially among the poor.

The Rivera-O'Reilly measure, if approved, would be implemented during the 2018-19 school year, providing the option for students who favor the program. According to the bill, seen [here](#), participation should be optional and equally available for female and male students.

Wednesday's hearing will not be the first time that the measure is being heard. [In August 2015](#), during a Committee on Workforce Development and Education hearing, Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly said the legislation 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.

The federal [Education Department](#) says there were about 750 public schools around the country with at least one single-sex class and 850 entirely single-sex public schools as of 2014. Although government figures are not available for earlier years, the National Association for Single Sex Public Education estimated that in the 2004-05 school year, 122 public schools offered at least one single-sex class and 34 public schools served just one sex.

Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly argued that 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," she added.

Critics, however, say that there is little evidence of substantial differences in brain development between boys and girls and that dividing children by gender can reinforce entrenched stereotypes.

Rebecca Bigler, a psychologist at the University of Texas, speaking in 2014 with the New York Times, said that segregating by sex — or any social category — increases prejudice based on stereotypes.

"You say there's a problem with sexism," Ms. Bigler said, "and instead of addressing the sexism, you just remove one sex."

It was on the above premise that the American Civil Liberties Union in 2014 [filed complaints](#) with the Education Department against four Florida school districts, accusing them of violations of federal civil rights law and of using "overly broad stereotypes" to justify separating girls and boys into different classrooms. The A.C.L.U. also [filed a complaint](#) in Austin, Tex., against two new single-sex middle schools, and has pending complaints in Idaho and Wisconsin and a nearly two-decade-old complaint in New York, according to The Times. Lawsuits in Louisiana and West Virginia have resulted in single-sex classes there reverting to coeducation.

Advocates of single-sex classes have cited the struggles of boys, who persistently lag behind girls in national tests of reading comprehension and are much more likely to face disciplinary problems and drop out of school. Educators also argue that girls underperform in science when compared with boys and benefit from being with other girls. And school officials say that children can be easily distracted by the opposite sex in the classroom.

On a local level, however, Education officials, during the 2015 hearing, said the department was 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 4-5 years ago at the sixth 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 during the August 2015 hearing, 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, who served as 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 had 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."

The Committee on Education, Youth and Recreation invited as testifiers for tomorrow's hearing D.O.E. Commissioner Sharon McCollum, Dept. of Labor Commissioner Catherine Hendry, My Brother's Workshop so-founder Scott Bradley, and V.I. Board of Education Chairwoman Winona Hendricks.