

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Bill Seeking To Strengthen Disciplinary Action For Children Who Skip School Will Soon Be Heard In Senate

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ST. CROIX -- A bill sponsored by Senator Novelle Francis, which was set to be heard today but was postponed following the [development of sewage issues](#) at the Fritz Lawaetz Legislature in Frederiksted, seeks to strengthen disciplinary action for students who skip school -- an action called truancy -- with the aim of minimizing the number of students across the territory who Mr. Francis says are chronically late or absent from classes on a daily basis.

“On any given day, we see school-aged children roaming in the streets during the time that they should be in school. They are out walking dogs, riding horses and sometimes even loitering in shopping centers,” Mr. Francis said. “Truancy can also play a significant role in the school to prison pipeline. Students who are missing time in the classroom are losing out on their education and putting their futures at risk. It is time that we get a handle on it and do something that would truly create a system of accountability.”

The measure, seen [here](#), lists a variety of acceptable reasons for a child's absence or tardiness, among them health reasons, approved school activities, court appearance, religious holidays, documented college visits and an extraordinary circumstance approved by the school's principal. The bill lists an inexcusable absence as the non-appearance of an enrolled student on a regular school day for any reason that is not included in the bill's acceptable reasons.

Mr. Francis says the law, in its current form, does not have a true chain of command or step-by-step process for accountability or disciplinary action to take place and protect the students. “I anticipate the support of my colleagues on this bill as we all focus on students and their development,” he said. “Truancy is sometimes a result of instability, neglect or abuse in a household and working to identify and address these causes not only supports education, but could also save our children from undue harm.”

The measure would not arbitrarily discipline students; it requires that supportive services be in place before any punitive action, and allows for multiple steps -- beginning from the second unexcused absence in a month -- with the aim of stopping the behavior before it grows into a habit.

"With this measure we give the current truancy law structure by which we could hold everyone accountable to include the parents as well as the students," Mr. Francis told The Consortium late Tuesday. "But more importantly, what we wanted to do was not to just penalize, but rather to allow for some mechanism where the students will be accountable and at the same time have them make up for it."

The measure builds on Mr. Francis's goal to minimize the school-to-prison pipeline that has devastated many of the territory's youth, and is part of the reason for the USVI's high crime rate.

In February 2016, Mr. Francis [hosted his first annual crime symposium](#), organized to stimulate better practices designed to target at-risk youth who are more prone to go straight from the school system into the criminal justice system.

“It’s time for a meaningful discussion on breaking the cycle that has carried too many of our young people straight from the classroom to Golden Grove,” Mr. Francis said last year. “For too long, our strategies for problems like this have been reactive instead of proactive.

Invited testifiers include Dept. of Education Commissioner Sharon McCollum, V.I.P.D. Commissioner Delroy Richards and V.I. Board of Education Chairwoman Winona Hendricks, among others.