

The Virgin Islands Consortium

VI Lawmakers Hear From School and Health Officials on Proposed Change in Start Times for Public Schools

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Public school and health bureaucrats offered conflicting views on whether the benefits of a later start to the territory's school days would outweigh the disruption an hour or so change would cause.

The Senate Committee on Education and Workforce Development, chaired by Senator Donna Frett-Gregory, on Tuesday heard testimony from health and education officials regarding Bill No. 33-0196, a measure sponsored by Senator Janelle K. Sarauw. The bill calls on Virgin Islands public schools to start no earlier than 8:30 a.m.

Milton Potter, executive director of the Virgin Islands Board of Education, told lawmakers more study of schedule changes is in order to avoid unintended consequences. "Perhaps legislation is not necessary," he told committee members. "Input from students, parents and teachers must also be sought. There is no guarantee that starting school later will result in teens getting more sleep."

Lawmakers' concern is, in part, that the 7:30 a.m. start of the day at St. Croix high schools, in particular, and the 8 a.m. start at junior high schools, are contributing to the tardiness, absenteeism and health issues related to lack of sleep.

"I can't say whether I am for or against this particular measure," said Sen. Kurt Vialet. He said it is a catch-22 for students territory-wide. At the Ivanna Eudora Kean High School on St. Thomas, for example, students must travel from St. John aboard the earliest morning ferries to reach school before the 7:50 a.m. start of the first period.

However, if the school day started later, they would arrive home on St. John later in the day, Mr. Vialet said. "I have heard mixed reactions in reference to the high school start time for students on St. Croix. Some students like it. Some students hate it. I've heard very, very mixed reaction in reference to start time for our elementary students. A number of parents have issues getting their children to school for 8:30 because they work for 8 o'clock."

Department of Health Commissioner Justa E. Encarnacion agreed that more data collection was needed to determine if student health and wellbeing would improve with a little more sleep. She said territory-wide collection of data regarding sleep deprivation, research on sleep and learning patterns for middle and high school students in the territory, and a correlation study between workforce start time and school start times, were needed.

The hearing, however, laid bare the conflicting information senators are receiving from parents, teachers and students and the information the D.O.E. collects.

Sen. Frett-Gregory requested attendance data from the St. Thomas-St. John District, which the VI Department of Education could not provide off hand.

Sen. Allison L. DeGazon drilled down further, inquiring of St. Croix Superintendent Carlos McGregor about the average time students were typically arriving at school. Students who do not take school buses are struggling to get to school on time using taxi or safari transportation. Mr. McGregor said students who ride school buses arrive between 6:45 and 7:00 a.m.

"Where are you getting that information from? I am getting reports from the school that students are arriving around 8 a.m." said Ms. DeGazon. "Does this mean they are losing a half-hour of instruction?," she asked.

Mr. Gregor also told lawmakers a "glitch" in the D.O.E.'s computer system prevented him from getting data on student tardiness this year.

The bill's sponsor, Ms. Sarauw, did not disguise her disappointment. "We are talking about school start times and how it affects our students ... if you are a principal, superintendent, you should be looking at that data consistently. The data should be

readily available. It is insulting to have a discussion without the hard information.”

Mr. Potter of the Board of Education said safety and other issues were a matter to be taken into consideration. According to Mr. Potter, “In most cases, parents are required to report to work at 8:00 a.m. and will generally drop their children off to school before 7:30 a.m. With the 8:30 start time, parents would still likely drop their children off at the same time in order for them to report to work on time.”

That would leave students “to roam” on the campus until the school day starts. “The safety risks increase when students are forced to hang around open campuses unsupervised,” he said. “Furthermore, later start times would likely lead to later end times, making it difficult to schedule extra-curricular activities such as academic tutoring, athletic practice, band practice and school club meetings.”

The measure was ultimately held in committee.