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Senators Table 3 Whitaker-Sponsored Measures Related School Curriculum, Approve Gittens Bill to Establish EMS High School Program

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Lawmakers tabled three Genevieve Whitaker-sponsored bills regarding curriculum Wednesday after opposition from Senate President Donna Frett-Gregory and Senator Kurt Vialet, who both contended it was not the Legislature's role to decide the curriculum for students in the Virgin Islands.

It's the job of the Department of Education, the Board of Education and the Career & Technical Education Center board, the senators argued during a hearing in the Committee on Education and Workforce Development.

Lawmakers, however, forwarded a Senator Kenneth Gittens-sponsored measure to establish an Emergency Medical Services High School Program Fund.

Bills No. 34-0091 and 34-0092 — sponsored by Ms. Whitaker — were designed to amend V.I. Code "to establish courses in family and consumer science, equine studies, digital literacy, and marine and environmental education" at the territory's public schools.

Bill No. 34-0093, which sought to establish a Spanish language course was tabled after a 4-1 vote, with Ms. Whitaker being the sole vote in favor.

Mr. Vialet, a former educator, voiced his concerns early on. "I honestly believe that the Senate needs to stay out of creating courses or mandating courses for our students to take."

The senator then pointed to curriculum-related laws enacted in the territory that have yet to be implemented. They include "Family Life, Sex Education and Substance Abuse, Age Prevention Education, Real Estate Appraisal, Financial Education, Hotel and Tourism Training Course, Swimming and Water Safety, and Basic Agriculture."

"The CTEC Board needs to make that determination as to what vocational courses are going to be offered in the high schools, the junior high schools and then they need to prepare a clear plan as to what is going to take to implement that course," Mr. Vialet said.

He added, "For the first time I'm seeing the CTEC board quite a bit more organized. We need to allow them along with the Department of Education to be able to create that template, not us. Let them do their assessment."

Ms. Frett-Gregory said while she understood the need to fill gaps in curriculum instruction, "there is a curriculum and instruction division within the Department of Education."

She asked Stephanie Berry, executive director of the V.I. Board of Education, whether the B.O.E. supported the legislation. "In theory," she said.

The senator then sought to learn whether there has been communication between the B.O.E. and the D.O.E. "to really begin to carve out what our curriculum should look like in particular areas." Ms. Berry said there was "consistent communication with the curriculum department at the Department of Education."

Sens. Gittens, Vialet, Frett-Gregory, Carla Joseph and Whitaker all voted in favor of tabling bills 34-0091 and 34-0092. Additional committee members Sens. Milton Potter and Janelle Sarauw were absent.

A fourth Whitaker-sponsored bill (No. 34-0094) that sought to establish and mandate stakeholder engagement and participation in the development of a report for the annual assessment and evaluation of all public-school facilities, was tabled as well.

Emergency Medical Services Program

Bill No. 34-0053, which seeks to establish an Emergency Medical Services High School Program was forwarded to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary.

Mr. Gittens said the legislation would create a program to facilitate EMS training for the territory's youth while providing them with full certification as EMTs prior to or upon graduation.

“With the shortage of emergency medical technicians in the territory and the demand for their services throughout the nation, I strongly believe that providing such training within in our public school system can help fill this critical void and provide our youth with avenues to pursue technical training and certification options in this significant field," Mr. Gittens said.

After concerns on sufficiency of the \$160,000 set aside to fund the program were raised, Mr. Gittens acknowledged the concerns and said funding would be provided through the Centennial Special Fund and the Perkins Grant Fund.

The measure passed 3-2, with Ms. Frett-Gregory and Ms. Joseph voting against the measure, though they said the bill could win their support in the Committee on Rules and Judiciary after being amended.

Mr. Gittens said if the measure were to become law, it would be named after Nowel Garcia, a paramedic on St. Croix who died from cancer.