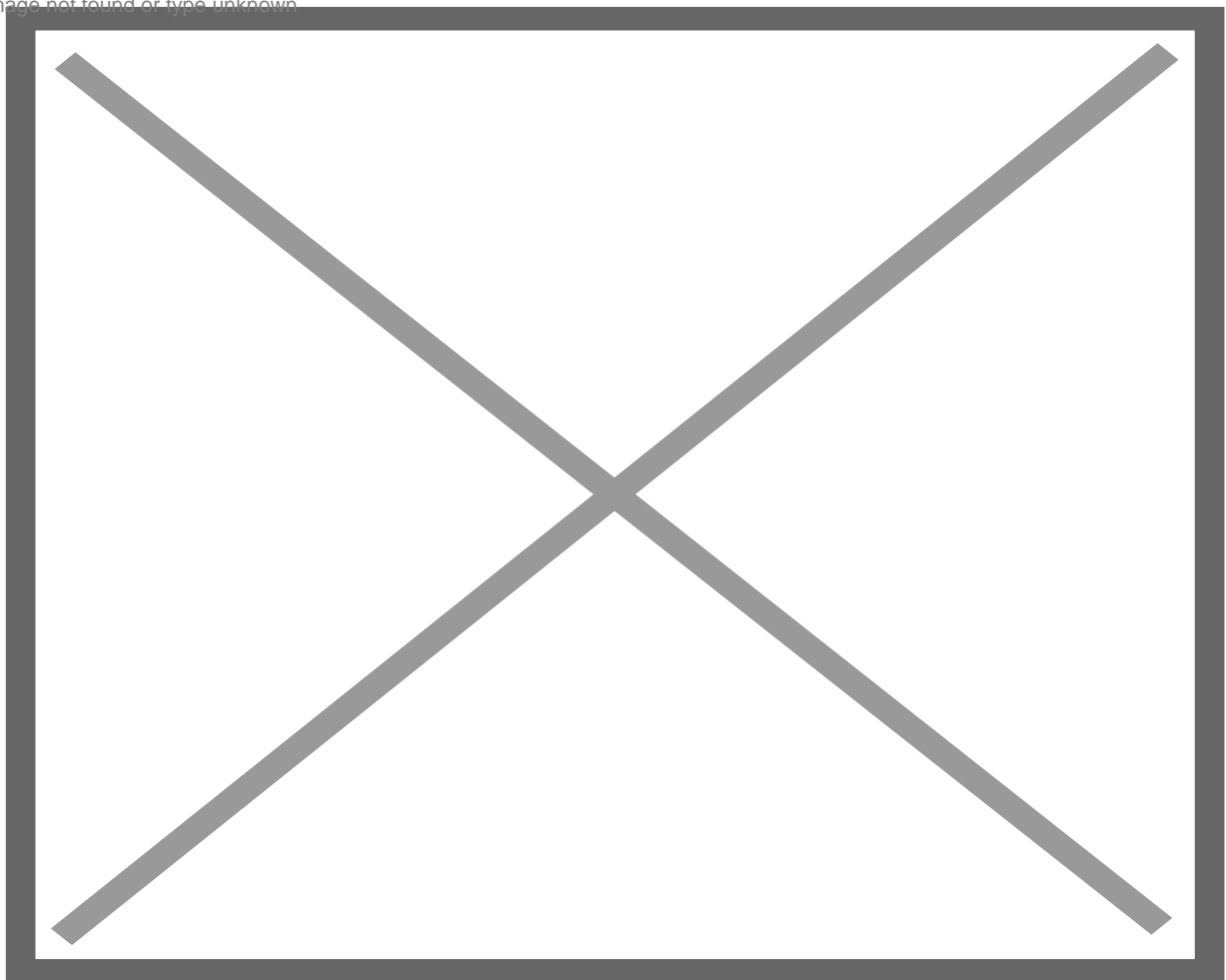


With Over 5,000 Students Skipping School Without Justification in 2019-2020 School Year, Education Officials Support Bill Seeking Holistic Approach to Truancy

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A bill that seeks to equally share the responsibility between the education system and parents for addressing the problem of truancy — when a child stays away from school without good reason — was heard in the Committee on Education and Workforce Development Tuesday and favorably forwarded to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary for further vetting.

The measure, sponsored by Senator Novelle Francis who during the 32nd Legislature [sponsored a similar measure](#), would "remove the punitive aspect from managing truancy and create a framework for which the root causes of truancy could be identified by allowing parents and all

stakeholders to engage in a process that is not punitive but instead collaborative and supportive," said Mr. Francis while introducing [Bill No. 34-0144](#).

"This pandemic and other issues have challenged us to rethink what attendance looks like," he said. "Truancy is a bigger issue than just missing school. As a law enforcement officer I've seen poor school attendance and unchecked absenteeism particularly opening the door to a gateway to the juvenile justice system and the school-to-prison pipeline."

The V.I. Dept. of Education supported the measure, with Commissioner Raquel Berry-Benjamin praising the inclusion of parents as a partner in combating the problem. She said Education leadership "recognizes the need and appreciates the gesture of this bill to bring parents to the forefront of their child's educational future"

"Bill No. 34-0144 will help to reestablish the shared responsibility between the VIDE and our parent stakeholders. Additionally, this bill proposes to offer parents and schools transformative, research-based options to help students, rather than punitive approaches that can have detrimental effects on their educational journeys," she added.

During the 2019-2020 school year, the number of students absent for 10 days or more, more than doubled compared to the previous year, according to data the V.I. Dept. of Education provided. The data reveals 5,596 students were absent for ten days or more during the 2019-2020 school year when total student population was 9,925 (56.4 percent) compared to 2,438 the previous year when total student population was 11,412 (21.4 percent) and 3,627 during the 2020-2021 school year when total student population was 10,778 (33.7 percent).

Ms. Berry-Benjamin blamed the surge in truancy during the 2019-2020 school year on the Covid-19 pandemic. "The Covid-19 pandemic appears to have a profound negative impact on student attendance," she said. The commissioner said the department was able to bring some students back to in-person learning for the 2020-2021 school year, "and the data indicated a decline of 22.7 % in the number of students reported absent for 10 or more days," she said.

"Nevertheless, research on chronic absenteeism and on remote learning continues to reinforce the urgency of providing appropriate support to children who are least prepared and especially to those at risk of becoming disengaged and eventually dropping out," Ms Berry-Benjamin added, citing research from García & Weiss, 2020.

The commissioner said Education leadership "strongly agrees that Bill No. 34-0144 also place the charge on us to be more responsible and consistent, and to hold our employees more accountable in our data-management, monitoring, and reporting practices. Although our schools may have mechanisms and protocols for collecting data on student absenteeism, the literature shows that schools are not adequately evaluating the effectiveness of their procedures for collecting and validating attendance data, resulting in unintended consequences for the students, schools, and communities (Gentle-Genitty et al., (2020))."

The bill, which was forwarded to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary for further vetting, is described as an Act amending V.I. Code "relating to school truancy to provide procedures for addressing unexcused absences from school and providing for related purposes."