

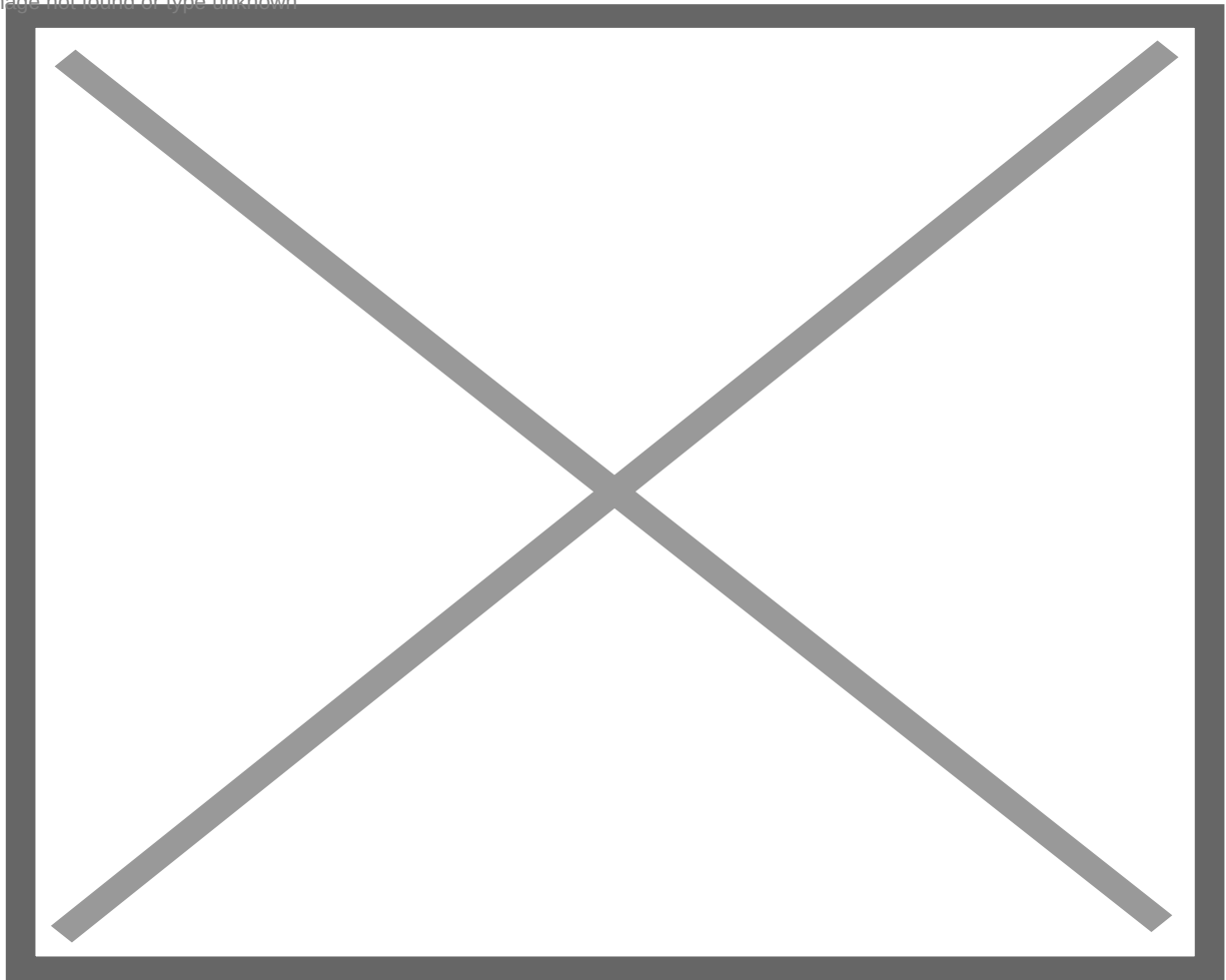
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Bill Seeking to Ensure Students Who Are Not Proficient in English Receive Expert Bilingual Assistance Moves Forward

Education / **Published On February 09, 2022 04:48 AM /**

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Students at the St. Croix Educational Complex High School. By. THE V.I. DEPT. OF EDUCATION

The Senate Committee on Education and Workforce Development on Tuesday voted favorably on a bill that seeks to amend a section of a 1972 law mandating the right to education for non-English speaking students.

Bill 34-0154 directs the V.I. Department of Education to establish and maintain what is called the Bilingual and English Language Development Program in public schools for students who are identified as English learners, and to assist them with English language proficiency and meeting

academy standards.

English Learners are defined as students in grades Pre-K through 12th grade who cannot speak, understand, read or write the English language well enough to carry on class activities in the same manner as their peers in the grades in which they are enrolled.

Sponsored by Senator Samuel Carrion, the measure was described by Senate President Donna Frett-Gregory as a significant piece of legislation that would impact the education system, and she voted with other lawmakers in favor to forward the bill to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary. However, she expressed concern on the impact the bill would have on educators as D.O.E. continues to struggle to retain teachers. "I voted yes to move the measure forward because it's a good measure, however, caution is required," she said.

Presenting his bill for debate, Mr. Carrion, who is Hispanic stated, "My legislation seeks to address a very pressing issue relative to the quality of education that non-English speaking students are receiving. The bill seeks to enhance the 1968 Act adopted locally in 1972."

The law was the first official federal recognition to meet the needs of students with non-English speaking ability and hasn't received any substantial revisions, though the original statute has been amended a number of times. "Needless to say, after 50 years these updates to our law are long overdue," Mr. Carrion, a freshman senator, further stated.

The bill says the Bilingual and English Language Development Program may consist of implementing a Bilingual Education or an English as a Second Language Support Program. If fewer than 10 students are identified as English Learners at a school, the Department of Education shall enroll the student at the nearest school where the Bilingual and English Language Development Program has been established, according to the measure.

"Bilingual Education consists of classroom instruction in English and the student's native language taught by qualified bilingual education teachers which allows English learners to acquire grade-level academic skills in their native language while learning the English Language," the legislation explains.

It also requires the Department of Education to establish procedures to communicate meaningfully with parents who have limited English proficiency to keep them informed about programs, services and activities available to all parents.

Dr. Renee Charleswell, deputy commissioner of Curriculum and Instruction at D.O.E., who provided testimony on behalf of Education Commissioner Racquel Berry-Benjamin, said that with the newly added sections, the department agrees that translating services are needed to keep parents who have English Learners informed about programs, services, and activities available to them.

"The State Office of Bilingual Education will continue its work to expand the essential resources to improve both districts' Bilingual and ESL Programs," Ms. Charleswell said. "At this time, however, the department currently uses technology to translate the information from English into Spanish and French Creole and then reviewed by personnel for accuracy and dissemination."

The State Office of Bilingual Education is the division within D.O.E. under federal law responsible for providing guidance, technical assistance, monitoring, and support for English language proficiency of English Learners in public schools.

Ms. Charleswell explained that the philosophical approach at DO.E. for the English as a Second Language program is to create an inclusive environment for English learners that embraces their diverse cultural backgrounds and community heritage.

“All stakeholders, including students, parents, teachers, administrators and community members share the responsibility to develop English learner's linguistic, cognitive, and academic skills using evidence-based, high-quality instructional practices that provide them with the skills and competencies to achieve their goals and aspirations to become contributing citizens prepared for college, careers, and the global economy,” said Charleswell.

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