

# Bill Incorporating Mental Health Education Into Curriculum Held in Committee as Dept. of Education Seeks Changes to Measure

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Every member of the Committee on Education and Workforce Development on Thursday supported a bill that adds mental health education to the school health programs under current statute, but the V.I. Dept. of Education says it cannot support the legislation in its current form and thus Bill No. 34-0086 was held in committee at the call of the chair.

Dept. of Education Asst. Commissioner Victor Somme III said during testimony that although the bill as proposed presents a great opportunity to begin the comprehensive work necessary to address the mental health needs of Virgin Islands youth, the Education Department is recommending that lead agencies on mental health, such as the V.I. Department of Health and the V.I. Department of Human Services take the lead on the legislation as the Education Department,

he said, is not the expert on mental health.

"It is important to recognize that not all school personnel are designed to engage in mental wellness..." he said.

Mr. Somme said that in order to develop sound school health programs, the department "will collaborate with all parties" while sharing expertise from the department's "position of strength and follow the guidance and recommendations of the professionals that are responsible for developing mental health programs."

"Thus, the V.I. Dept. of Education appreciates the effort of Bill No. 34-0086, however, cannot support the bill in its current form," Mr. Somme said as he explained the justification behind the Education Department's unwillingness to support the legislation.

However, in her testimony, Psychologist Lori Thompson of Insight Psychological Services, LLC described the legislation as a welcome first step for young people in the territory. Much discussion was generated between committee members and the assistant commissioner before the sponsor of the bill explained the purpose of the measure.

The bill's chief sponsor, Sen. Milton Potter explained that the intention of the bill is not to overburden teachers. He said the number one priority should be what is in the best interest of the territory's children.

The bill calls for mental health education and instruction that includes age-appropriate model learning activities for students. It recommends that students be engaged in activities that focus on the principles of mental health, learning activities that develop pupils' mental health wellness, social connectedness and supportive relationships among other principles that encompass the mental health components of the National Health Education Standards.

"Our children are suffering in silence when it comes to mental health issues," Mr. Potter said while pointing out why the bill was purposely not very specific to a curriculum.

"I don't think we are the subject matter experts here...when we put the bill together, it was not done in a vacuum. We had sit-down meetings with many of the experts...we heard some of their concerns and we made adjustments accordingly. We are not telling Education how to develop its curriculum," Mr. Potter reasoned.

Mr. Potter is of the opinion that far too many of the territory's young people fall between the cracks "because they are quietly just sitting there, they are not being disruptive, they are just sitting there and we all know that in our school systems once you're quietly behaving you are moved on; the attention is on those folks who are being disruptive," he opined.