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Dept. of Education Says it Will Integrate V.I. and Caribbean History Into Curriculum Without Need of New Law

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The V.I. Dept. of Education commissioner nominee and at least two lawmakers have questioned whether legislation is necessary to implement V.I. and Caribbean history into the school curriculum.

The intention of the bill's sponsor, Senator Genevieve Whitaker, is to ensure that local and Caribbean-centered history are strategically taught at all public schools in the territory by intentionally structuring lessons into the curriculum.

While the VI Code speaks to teaching the aforementioned courses as part of the curriculum in both elementary and secondary schools, the senator argued that these lessons are often sporadic

and at the whim of individual educators, and that the current code does not explicitly state that these subjects be taught at all grade levels. She has proposed that legislation be passed to include mandatory instructions for grades K to 12th grade.

But Dr. Dionne Wells-Hedrington, commissioner nominee of the V.I. Department of Education, said the move was sending “a wrong message.”

“I hear the sentiments and I feel the uneasiness of the body because of past practices, and I get that, but I really don’t want us to think, or the perception to be that in order for the Department of Education to act on anything, it has to be a law,” she offered.

Instead, Ms. Wells-Hedrington asked lawmakers to give the department an opportunity to prove that is able to implement the needed changes. “The department needs to be given the opportunity to execute the plan that they have put in place to change the integration of Caribbean History and Virgin Islands History from Pre-K to 12th grade,” she said, adding that legislation could come into play only if the department is falling short on its commitment.

Senators Donna Frett-Gregory and Senator Kenneth Gittens were also not convinced of legislating the changes. Both were concerned about the legal backlash that may rear its head in the future. Mr. Gittens described it as an instance of possible “over legislation” while Ms. Frett-Gregory thought lawmakers may be “creating another layer of another court matter.”

Ms. Wells-Hedrington believes that enforcement and revision of the standards would suffice, instead of mandating instructions in the law; standards that had already been agreed upon by the Virgin Islands Board of Education. D.O.E. officials shared that development of new standards and curriculum for Social Studies were approved on August 29, 2022 and would incorporate VI and Caribbeans history, noting that the proposed bill represents work the department is doing now with focus on civics, economics, geography and history at every grade level.

“Now that we have adopted the standards our next approach is to align the resources and make sure that that component of training is provided for all of our teachers,” she said.

Following years of discussion and research, Ms. Wells-Hedrington said the department plans to introduce learning resources by local and Caribbean authors and historians.

The implementation plan is described as having “a number of phases” including a gap analysis phase which is scheduled for today, according to Dr. Yvette McMahon-Arnold, director of instructional development. “The board has accepted and we will come to the table and look at the standards; review the standards and determine where those gaps are,” she said.

Meanwhile, Dr. Kyza Callwood, Chairman, V.I. Board of Education spoke in favor of the bill and said it is meant to organize the curriculum and the new standards approved by the board.

“Currently, the department is already integrating VI History and Caribbean History into the fabric of the school system, all the bill now just does is codify it to ensure that it can always be done and to ensure that that doesn’t change as the department turns around or make changes,” he explained.

D.O.E. anticipates the complete publication of a customized Civics text books for secondary school in the coming months. Vincent Hudson, legal counsel for the department said the civics book should be ready in six to nine months as well as the review and analysis for VI History work books from grades three to eight by June 2024.

Ericilda Ottley-Herman, St. Croix insular superintendent, assured that all courses will be grade-level appropriate. Resources also need to be developed to support teachers, particularly international educators who choose to work in the U.S. Virgin Islands.

The bill has been sent to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary for consideration.

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