



**36TH LEGISLATURE OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS
COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT**

The Honorable Senator Kurt A. Vialet
Chair of Committee

Testimony Presented By
The Honorable Justa Encarnacion, RN, BSN, MBA/HCM
Commissioner of Health

on

Bill No. 36-0080 An Act amending title 17 Virgin Islands Code, chapter 5 mandating a daily morning exercise routine for students in all public schools in the Virgin Islands
Sponsor: The Honorable Alma Francis Heyliger

1 Good day, Honorable Senator Kurt A. Vialet, Chair of the Committee on Education and Workforce
2 Development; Vice Chair Senator Avery L. Lewis; committee and non-committee members; and
3 the viewing and listening public.

4 I am Dr. Nicole Craigwell-Syms, Assistant Commissioner for the Virgin Islands Department of
5 Health, providing testimony on behalf of Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion, who is
6 currently out of the territory attending a conference. Also joining me today are Assistant
7 Commissioners Reuben Molloy, Deputy Commissioner Janis Valmond and Chief Legal Counsel
8 Mackiesh Taylor-Jones.

9 Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on Bill No. 36-0080, an Act amending Title
10 17 Virgin Islands Code, Chapter 5 mandating a daily morning exercise routine for students in all
11 public schools in the Virgin Islands. This legislation aligns directly with the Department of
12 Health's ongoing mission to improve the physical, behavioral, and emotional well-being of our
13 children. As public health advocates, we commend this Committee for advancing a practical,
14 evidence-based policy that addresses some of the most urgent childhood health concerns facing
15 our Virgin Islands youth.

16 The USVI, like much of the United States, is facing a childhood health crisis, particularly regarding
17 chronic disease, obesity and physical inactivity. According to the USVI Youth Risk Behavior
18 Survey (2017 USVI YRBS), 37.2% of high school youth met the classification of overweight
19 (16%) or obese (21.2%) and our Maternal and Child Health (MCH) Program data shows that
20 approximately 21% of children aged 2–5 are classified as overweight or obese. Among
21 adolescents, physical inactivity is a growing concern. The YRBS also reports that only 24% of
22 middle and high school students meet the recommended 60 minutes of daily moderate-to-vigorous
23 physical activity.

24 The link between childhood obesity and long-term health risks, including diabetes, hypertension,
25 and cardiovascular disease, is well documented. We can proactively reduce the likelihood of
26 chronic illness later in life by embedding daily physical activity into the school day. This is
27 especially important in communities where children may not have consistent access to safe parks,
28 recreational facilities, or after-school programs. Implementing a mandatory morning exercise

1 routine ensures that every child, every day, gets moving, regardless of their residence or economic
2 status.

3 Physical activity plays a vital role in a child's overall development. Through regular movement,
4 children strengthen their muscles and bones, improve balance and coordination, and enhance
5 motor skills that support everyday activities like walking, running, jumping and playing sports.
6 Structured morning exercises help build habits of consistency, teamwork, and discipline, while
7 also allowing children to discover the joy of movement-falling in love with being active at an early
8 age. When children experience the joy of movement early on, they are more likely to carry those
9 habits into adolescence and adulthood. Consistent physical activity not only builds healthier bodies
10 but also improves classroom concentration, energy levels, and overall engagement throughout the
11 school day.

12 The benefits of morning exercise extend far beyond physical health. In fact, regular movement is
13 a critical tool in behavioral health promotion, especially among school-aged children. Exercise
14 has been shown to improve mood, reduce anxiety, and enhance emotional regulation. This is
15 especially important given the growing behavioral health concerns among our youth, including
16 rising rates of stress, depressive symptoms, and attention-related challenges. The American
17 Academy of Pediatrics, the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, and the
18 Children's Hospital Association have declared a national state of emergency in children's mental
19 health. U.S. Surgeon Generals have also issued formal advisories warning of a youth mental health
20 crisis, including risks associated with social media.

21 Studies from the CDC and the American Psychological Association confirm that even short bursts
22 of physical activity can enhance concentration, reduce classroom disruptions, and improve
23 memory and cognitive function. According to the USVI Department of Health's 2024 Behavioral
24 Health Snapshot, behavioral issues in school—such as attention deficits, aggression, or
25 withdrawal—are often tied to inadequate sleep, poor nutrition, and a lack of physical activity. A
26 structured morning exercise routine, implemented consistently across all public schools, provides
27 students with a positive, health-promoting start to the day. It sets the tone for focus, calmness, and
28 readiness to learn—while reinforcing healthy habits that can last a lifetime.

1 Prevention in education must be universal to be effective, just as it is with healthcare. Requiring
2 all public schools to include daily morning exercise ensures a consistent baseline of health
3 promotion across the entire student population.

4 This measure will especially benefit students from households experiencing stress or instability,
5 youth with limited access to extracurricular sports or wellness programs, and children managing
6 behavioral or attention-related challenges. We can ensure equitable access to one of the most
7 powerful tools we have for both physical and mental health by making physical activity a core part
8 of the academic day.

9 The Department of Health stands ready to collaborate with the Virgin Islands Department of
10 Education, school wellness coordinators, and physical education professionals to support the
11 effective rollout of this initiative. In proposing this legislation, the USVI will join several other
12 jurisdictions in establishing legislation to promote physical activity in the school setting. A
13 systematic review of physical activity policies and legislation in schools found these policies can
14 affect increasing levels of physical activity and promote healthy outcomes for youth (Robertson-
15 Wilson, Jennifer E. et al., 2012).

16 In summary, Bill No. 36-0080 is a low-cost, high-impact intervention that advances public health,
17 enhances behavioral wellness, and supports academic performance. It sends a clear message that
18 we value the whole-child approach to education—where physical and mental health are not treated
19 as afterthoughts, but as foundations for lifelong success.

20 In closing, I would like to acknowledge the dedicated workers within the Virgin Islands
21 Department of Health. The Department remains committed to working collaboratively with the
22 Legislature and our partner agencies to build upon the progress achieved and to continue
23 strengthening our systems.

24 Mr. Chair, committee and non-committee members, thank you for your time, attention, and
25 unwavering commitment to the health and well-being of our community. We welcome your
26 questions and remain available to provide any additional information or support as needed.