Good Day to the Honorable Genevieve Whitaker, Chairwoman of the Committee on Education & Workforce Development, the Honorable Janelle Sarauw, Vice-Chairwoman, Honorable Committee Members and other Senators of the 34th Legislature of the Virgin Islands, viewers and listeners.

Thank you Senator Whitaker, on behalf of President Yvette Browne and the United States Virgin Islands Congress of Parents, Teachers and Students Association, Inc. (“USVI PTSA”) Board of Directors for inviting us to testify at today’s hearing. I am Margarita Benjamin, and I serve as President-Elect of the USVI PTSA. Unfortunately due to circumstances beyond our control we were not able to appear in person at today’s hearing but we believe it is important that our testimony be placed on record.

The USVI PTSA is the state affiliate of the National Parents and Teachers Association (“PTA”) which has chartered member associations in the fifty states, the District of Columbia, the U.S. Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico and the Department of Defense schools in Europe and the Pacific. We are the largest youth advocacy organization of the Nation with a proud history.
of parent engagement and volunteerism which has influenced public policy and impacted public education in remarkably significant ways on the National and Local levels. Our mission is “to make every child’s potential a reality by engaging and empowering families and communities to advocate for all children”. Collaboration, commitment, diversity, respect and accountability are core values of the parent teacher association.

As the state representative body in this Territory, we are charged with the task of chartering and assisting local units in all of our public schools who become incorporated members of PTA. Organizing as a chartered member entitles our local units to the many resources afforded to all PTA members. This includes providing access to a wealth of educational resources, professional development, organizational training, student activities, corporate discounts, disaster relief, networking opportunities, policy development, program implementation and other resources. This is accomplished through conventions, conferences, seminars, webinars, meetings, projects, grants, awards and collaborations.

As a partner in the education process, the USVI PTSA’s attention is not only paid to the student, for we know that the learning environment is also critical to academia and social development. Adopting the unified model of our national organization, many of our efforts are planned and
implemented through collaborations which provide the collective resources for great accomplishments.

The PTA has a long history of leading parents as they constructively endeavour to improve the quality of education in our public schools and has positions on a variety of topics affecting children all over the country to include family engagement in education, federal investment in education, public dollars for public schools, gun safety and violence preventions, special education, data reporting, privacy & technology, child nutrition, juvenile justice and delinquency prevention, and early learning and childhood education. For the USVIPTSA, the lack of school maintenance, progress of capital projects and state of education in the Territory continues to be an area of concern.

The USVIPTSA has a proud record of working with and/or receiving support for our programs from the Department of Education, the Board of Education, the Teacher’s Union, the Disability Council, Foundations territory-wide, and other agencies on initiatives that we deem in the best interest of our members.

On numerous occasions we have aligned our Association with proposed legislation that would positively impact education as well as challenged those bills which our membership considered
counterproductive. We have also had the opportunity to work with past Legislatures and students during NPTA Advocacy Week in honor of PTA Founders’ Day on February 17th (1897). We support the concept of shared responsibility in the development of laws, school policies and in curriculum decision, and urge inclusion of all stakeholders: parents, teachers, students, principals, administrators, and the general public in this process. We believe that where law, procedures, or other barriers have discouraged broader participation in school policy decisions, necessary measures should be taken to facilitate shared responsibility and the development of a process that fosters ongoing collaborative participation.

In fostering collaboration, we are very appreciative of the invitation from Commissioner Racquel Berry-Benjamin, which we have accepted, another opportunity to collaborate with the Virgin Islands Department of Education as both President Browne and I sit on the Department’s Region 3 Comprehensive Center Team’s Advisory Board. Furthermore, the USVI PTSA’s also participates on the Department of Education Strategic Planning Steering Committee, and has ongoing communication with the Directors of School and Community Affairs in both Districts. These efforts will help us mutually and significantly foster an effective two-way communication between schools and parents as we rebuild. It is our goal
to positively impact parents and families by educating them on how to navigate the educational system and become involved to ensure our children receive a quality education.

As it relates to challenges, the Territory’s schools and the USVIPTSA have always faced the challenge of improving parent involvement and family engagement. For the USVI PTSA to be more effective in our work, there are some basic infrastructural needs that must be addressed. Of the many PTAs nationwide, the USVI PTSA is one without an office location and paid staff. We are 100% operated by volunteers which impacts the effective work of the organization. The previous progress we made in obtaining office space through the Department of Education was withdrawn during a change in administration and our efforts to utilize a shared site with another organization on St. Croix was impacted by the storms in 2017. Additionally, the USVIPTSA has over the years experienced changes, many due to change in leadership and administration, and limited resources and support; however, we always persevere to overcome the difficulties that come with change, retention and growth. Having said that we must recognize our dedicated volunteers for their commitment, we continue to work with dedicated volunteers who contribute their valuable
time and skills to support our PTAs and schools to ensure our children are provided every opportunity to succeed.

While we have had what I would illustrate as “hills and valleys” in registered membership, the three years between catastrophic hurricanes Irma and Maria - and now the ongoing coronavirus pandemic COVID-19 - were marked by recognized growth as we focused on rebuilding membership. Notably, the PTA honoured the USVI PTSA at National Convention for increased membership. Now, the pandemic is forcing us to be more creative than ever before. We now must evolve from face-to-face meetings to maximizing the use of electronic mediums to communicate, whether by email, conference call or virtual meetings. Hence, it is even more pertinent for us to find new ways to connect and work with PTAs to ensure they are able to function in this new environment and to engage parents many who would not traditionally engage at face to face meetings. This may be an opportunity for increased participation. Our Membership Committee Chairwoman, Ms. Lisa Mitchell-Harris, is competently spearheading the effort to connect to our local PTA units and to schools who does not have an active Parent Teacher Association.

Finally, we can accomplish nothing without engaging our volunteer officers who serve and represent the critical masses of students whom we
all speak for. In the interest of time, I leave you with a soundbite of the pros and cons of the virtual learning experience that they have voiced from our students as they continue to express themselves through this pandemic:

**PROS**

1.) Reducing the spread of the COVID-19 virus while still having the opportunity to learn.

2.) No travel time and easier to get ready and be on time for classes.

3.) Encourages parents to be more involved with and aware of their child’s education;

4.) Allows students to utilize technology as a learning tool and not just for social media and playing games; and

5.) Additional online resources and support (ie. online reading books).

**CONS**

1.) Sometimes cameras and mics on computers tend to be glitchy while using the learning platform;

2.) Completing some class assignments like math can be challenging and tedious when trying to set-up problems;

3.) Some students need a designated environment for learning and may not easily be able to mentally switch between home and school:

4.) Loss of electricity due to WAPA power outages, internet reliability, computer malfunction, etc., cause major disruption in the learning day.

5.) Some teachers are no longer teaching in the classroom but rather depend on software and programs to do the work for them;
6.) Teachers need to be more involved in teaching and not rely on YouTube videos and other programs to do it;

7.) Working parents have challenges with finding child care and learning coaches;

8.) Parents not being able to assist child due to language or educational barriers; and

9.) Handwritten assignments are not provided. There are continued technical challenges with submitting assignments in learning platform (Records are lost or missing information requiring students to have to start over).

Some of the questions that parents would like answered are:

- What is the instructional day going to look like when children return to school?
- What time is drop off & pick up?
- What provisions are made for bus safety?
- Will parents be given the opportunity to visit the campus before students return or be shown a virtual tour of their child's school?
- How long are students expected to wear a mask before taking an outside break for fresh air?
- Do parents understand that once their child gets in the classroom they will not be able to leave with the exception of going to the restroom?
- Will the school day hours change?
- We understand DOE can't test before opening in-school because enough tests are not available. What is the plan for DOE to get an ample supply of COVID tests for opening of public schools?
• What are CDC specific guidelines for opening schools?

This information was recently shared with the Virgin Islands Department of Education for their assistance in providing information to the USVIPTSA and Parents.

Parents are integral to the process – and should be at the table working with legislators, administrators and educators to develop or enhance educational programs that promotes early childhood education, college preparation, fine arts, vocational education, extracurricular activities and a healthy school environment. Through the USVI PTSA, we will continue to be guided by the experience of our future and to advocate for legislation or policies.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide testimony. We look forward to working with the 34th Legislature’s Committee on Education and Workforce Development and encourage you to join the USVI PTSA to “Speak for Every Child with One Voice” and present legislation that further the education, physical and mental health, welfare, and safety of children and youth in the US. Virgin Islands.

To our viewing and listening audience, we invite you to join us in advocating for our children by contacting us at membership.usviptsa@gmail.com. To learn more about PTA, visit our National website at www.pta.org. Thank you.