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Statement by Honourable Sharie B. de Castro Minister for Education, Youth Affairs & Sports on the Approach To Addressing Serious and Extreme Student Misbehaviour

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At-Large Representative

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The Ministry of Education, Youth Affairs & Sports

Approach To Addressing Serious and Extreme Student Misbehaviour

Madam Speaker, I rise today to speak frankly and urgently about an issue that weighs heavily on our national conscience—the rise of serious and extreme misbehaviour among our students.

Over the past year, our schools have witnessed an alarming increase in incidents that go far beyond typical adolescent misjudgement. In the first two months of this year alone, over 85 suspensions were recorded across the Territory's four public secondary schools, the majority stemming from drug-related offences, violent altercations, and inappropriate sexual behaviour. We have encountered weapons on campuses, students suffering hallucinations from THC-laced edibles, and even instances involving sexual enhancement products found in the possession of children as young as twelve. These are not isolated events. They are evidence of a deeper, systemic challenge that no school system can address in isolation.

In February 2025, the Ministry of Education presented this troubling data to the National Security Council. Following that presentation, we convened a joint meeting with senior officials from the Ministry of Health to foster greater cross-ministerial collaboration— particularly in the areas of identifying at-risk students, improving information sharing, and establishing preventative systems of care.

With the support of His Excellency the Governor, these discussions expanded to include top officials from the Royal Virgin Islands Police Force. Out of these engagements, two critical mechanisms were agreed upon: the formation of a Steering Group on Student Wellbeing, and the creation of a multi-agency Task Force on Student Support and Intervention. I am pleased to report that both bodies have been established, and the Steering Group will convene its first meeting this week.

To inform the work of these bodies, the Ministry of Education has developed a comprehensive Framework for Student Support and Wellbeing, which outlines a multipronged strategy to address the root causes of student misconduct while promoting resilience, student empowerment, academic progress, parental support and social development. This framework includes the expansion of school-based counselling, the implementation of social-emotional learning across classrooms, the training of teachers in restorative justice and child safeguarding, and the strengthening of re-entry pathways and alternative education options for students at risk of exclusion.

Madam Speaker, it is important to note that even as we pursue national and inter-agency responses, schools themselves have been actively developing and implementing their own behaviour support initiatives. At the Bregado Flax Educational Centre – Secondary Division in Virgin Gorda, a well-functioning Student Behaviour Committee has been established. This committee works collaboratively to assess challenges and develop targeted interventions to support students exhibiting behavioural concerns.

Similarly, at the Elmore Stoutt High School, a powerful new initiative has taken root—the BEAM Programme, which stands for *Beatitudes, Empowerment, and Mentorship*. This programme targets students facing serious behavioural and emotional challenges and offers them structured, compassionate intervention. The BEAM Programme held its initiation meetings during the month of May and received overwhelming support from community members, law enforcement officials, and mental health professionals. The programme will continue with regular mentorship sessions, counselling support, and structured goal-setting, all tailored to meet the individual needs of each participant.

Madam Speaker, our efforts have also extended beyond our borders. In January 2025, with support from the BVI London Office, the UK Department of Education and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, officials from the Ministry met with representatives from the Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) in the UK. There, we learned about models such as the *Rise Up* programme, which equips youth practitioners—especially those with lived experience—with the tools to support and redirect young people exposed to violence and trauma.

During our most recent education mission to London in May 2025, the delegation was able to visit several of these intervention programmes first-hand. At the Southwark Inclusive Learning Service, we saw a multidisciplinary team—comprising psychologists, mentors, social workers, and youth officers—supporting students who had been excluded from school. We were particularly inspired by the SAFE Barbershop Programme, a culturally responsive model providing young Black males with safe spaces for dialogue, mentorship, and identity development. These are not aspirational concepts. These are actionable models that the Virgin Islands is now working to adapt and apply in our own schools and communities.

Madam Speaker, this must be clearly understood: the Ministry of Education cannot carry this burden alone. Schools are a critical node, but they are not the only one. What we are facing is not just an education issue—it is a community issue, a social issue, and in many cases, a public health issue.

To meaningfully address these challenges, we must galvanize the support of our entire society. We are therefore calling on churches, youth groups, community organizations, and concerned individuals to partner with us. The Ministry will soon launch a formal call for volunteer youth workers and community mentors—people who are willing to walk alongside our young people, especially those most at risk. Whether you are a retired educator, a faith leader, or simply a citizen who wants to help, we need your presence, your experience, and your voice.

These volunteers will be offered training and will work alongside educators, counsellors, and community professionals to serve as trusted adults—mentors who listen, guide, and model positive behaviours. It is through these relationships, and not punishment alone, that we will change lives.

Madam Speaker, I must also recognise the tireless efforts of our teachers, school leaders, counsellors, and youth officers who face these challenges every day. They are not only educators—they are first responders, caregivers, and advocates for our children. They deserve our full support.

In the weeks ahead, we will continue to refine our policy response and will bring forward legislative and budgetary recommendations to this House as necessary. Our long-term vision is the creation of a student support facility where vulnerable students can receive targeted academic, therapeutic, and life-skills interventions outside the traditional school setting.

Madam Speaker, we are not standing still. We are acting with urgency, purpose, and a deep commitment to safeguarding the well-being and potential of every child in this Territory. We are building a system that does not just react to misbehaviour, but anticipates and prevents it; one that does not stigmatise, but supports; one that does not cast out, but lifts up.

Let this be our collective pledge—that we will not allow any child to slip through the cracks because we failed to act, or because we failed to care. Together—with our schools, our communities, our churches, and this Government—we will rise to meet this moment.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.