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Rise of Social Media Shines Light on Brutal Fights at USVI Public Schools: 212 in 2018-19, 33 So Far in 2020

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Student getting kicked in the head after he fell during a brawl at the St. Croix Central High School last week By. VIDEO OF THE FIGHT

Last week a number of videos circulated on social media of fights at the St. Croix Central High School. The brawls almost resembled riots, as throngs of students — both male and female at various locations of the school — engaged in dangerous physical battles, some of them in groups, as they rushed, kicked and punched each other. Surrounding the fights were at times dozens of students cheering on the melee as the punching and kicking raged on. Students who lost their footing and fell to the ground saw no mercy, as kicks in the stomach, head and all over immediately greeted their bodies.

It was a frightening sight [to behold on social media](#), and one of dread for parents whose children were engaged in the brutal behavior.

On the same day in St. Thomas, according to Senator Kenneth Gittens, similar fights had broken out.

The Department of Education said during a Senate hearing on Friday that the 2018-19 school year had 212 fights territory-wide. So far for 2020, there have been 33 fights. These incidents have been happening for decades, but the rise of social media platforms such as Facebook and especially WhatsApp, has shined a light on these dangerous occurrences, leading lawmakers in the 33rd Legislature to seek answers from D.O.E. officials.

Department of Education Commissioner, Raquel Berry-Benjamin, said in testimony read by recently named Assistant Education Commissioner, Victor Somme III, that while D.O.E. has made school safety a priority, students' behavior at school is a reflection of the wider community.

"It is time for the Virgin Islands to acknowledge the fact that our children's behaviors are a reflection of the larger community," said Mr. Somme. "Children behave according to what they see and experience, and not what they are told. They solve problems the way they see adults around them resolving problems. We, at the VIDE, do not necessarily believe that only improving student safety is the solution to reducing and/or eliminating student fights and other unruly behaviors. We believe that fighting is the symptom and addressing the root cause is the answer. Children expressing themselves through fights is a societal problem that cannot be solved solely by a school, a district, or the department. Every segment of the community must play a role so that children see the behaviors expected of them being modeled no matter the setting they are in."

Senator Novelle Francis acknowledged D.O.E.'s assessment to be valid. "The Village is now seeing the manifestation of crack babies, mental retardation parents. We're seeing where it requires all hands on deck in being able to recognize these issues and bring some solvability to the problem that we're experiencing," said Mr. Francis, who throughout his tenure as a lawmaker has [promoted measures](#) to diminish the school to prison pipeline.

But the senator nonetheless sought responses from department officials that would speak to measures being taken to curb the violence at school. He inquired about programs within the education system that would counter unruly behaviors learned at home from a tender age.

Mr. Somme spoke of a "Granny Pre-K Program" which he said involves 4-year-olds who receive both academic and behavioral learning, along with "appropriate values." He said there were 20 students at Claude O. Markoe in the program and 20 at the Pearl B. Larsen Pre-K through 8th Grade School as of Friday. The program is expected to be expanded to the Ricardo Richards Elementary School next year, he said. As an example of deeper integration of methods to curb the unbecoming behavior, the schools have included empathy in their curriculum.

Even so, those efforts, Mr. Francis said, would not show results until later down the road — 6-8 years from now. He then pressed D.O.E. officials for initiatives aimed at diminishing the current problem.

"We are very much pushing the Positive Behavioral Intervention Support System (P.B.I.S.) in our schools because we want to have not only students but adults model proper behavior," Mr. Somme said. Mr. Somme said a recent training that included over 50 teachers and administrators in the St. Croix District was aimed at P.B.I.S. training.

Also in place is a Memorandum of Understanding between D.O.E. and the Virgin Islands Police Department which preceded the current administration. Mr. Somme said changes have not been made to the MOU since at least former Governor Kenneth Mapp's tenure, though he said there have been regular communication between D.O.E. and the V.I.P.D.'s commander of the School Security Bureau. There are currently four police officers stationed at the public schools in the St. Croix District: two at the St. Croix Educational Complex and another two at the St. Croix Central High School, D.O.E. officials made known.

Mr. Somme said he doesn't believe that fights at public schools in the USVI have increased. "I think what we're seeing is more exposure due to social media. Students taking videos on their cellphones and then posting it to Facebook and other social media platforms," he said.

That answer was not satisfactory to Mr. Francis, who said that even if the fights hadn't increased, the fact that they have been occurring unabated for years, meant that D.O.E. needed to step up its effort and become more "aggressive."

In a statement provided to the Consortium Sunday morning, D.O.E. said, "The Virgin Islands Department of Education condemns violence of any kind on its school campuses, and is serious about school safety, school bus safety and the steps needed to improve both. As the VIDE is committed to improving student safety on our campuses, exterminating students' maladaptive behaviors one at a time, as opposed to eradicating the entire nest, has proven to be ineffective. It is time for the Virgin Islands community to acknowledge that our children's behavior is a reflection of problems in our larger society. Children behave according to what they see and experience, and not what they are told. They solve problems the way they see adults resolve their issues."

The statement also said, "As we address these very serious issues at Central High and many of our schools across the territory, the good work of the majority of our students who work hard and display good citizenship should not be overshadowed. On Mon. Feb. 10 beginning at 9:30 a.m., 238 students who achieved Honor Roll status in the 2nd Marking Period will be recognized and receive certificates."

As for school monitors, there were 57 in the St. Croix District as of Friday. Mr. Somme said training has been scheduled for June 8-12th. He also said that monitors would soon be wearing uniforms so they could be easily identified by students.

D.O.E. officials also revealed that there were 54 students enrolled in the Alternative Education program, which does not include the Youth Rehabilitation Program.

Senator Kenneth Gittens was more critical of the education department, telling its officials during the hearing, "We need to stop dreaming and wake up, because the world has changed drastically." He reminded the testifiers of school principals of the past, including current Senator Kurt Vialet, stating that those principals had known every student by name and would have been aware of most potential brawls before they took place — and would have alerted law enforcement to intervene. The senator's comments suggested he believed that current school leaders were too nonchalant in their approach.

"I don't understand what's going on today," he said. "And we have social media right now that's the best tool to law enforcement, and I don't think we're maximizing it to the extent possible."

Mr. Gittens, who had a video of a recent incident, said he shared the video with several testifiers at the hearing, including recently named Police Chief Sidney Elskoe. The senator then asked the chief to describe what he saw.

"I saw a school bus full of students. There were two males in the bus that appeared to not be students... they appeared to be verbally assaulting the students. They walked out of the rear door of the bus and left the area," Chief Elskoe said.

Mr. Gittens responded: "I don't have no small children going to school now, but this is a serious concern to me, and it should be a serious concern to you all."

The Department of Education did not provide details of school bus incidents. Mr. Somme said because of the manner in which the school system is currently structured, "there is no mechanism in the platform to report school bus incidents."