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Dept. of Education Mulls Cellphone Ban as Violence at Schools Becomes "More Than We Can Handle," Says Commissioner

DOE prioritizes conflict resolution and parental involvement to mitigate violence

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Students at the St. Croix Educational Complex High School. By. V.I. CONSORTIUM

Violence in the territory's schools is "becoming more than we can handle," says Education Commissioner Dionne Wells-Hedrington. She was speaking to lawmakers during a hearing of the Senate Committee on Education and Workforce Development, which engaged on Wednesday in an in-depth conversation about the public school system in the Virgin Islands.

Among the issues discussed was the current “rash of violence or aggression in our schools,” as Dr. Wells-Hedrington described it responding to concerns raised by Senate President Novelle Francis Jr. He admitted to DOE representatives that [violent acts in schools](#), now often [captured on camera](#) are “weighing heavy on my heart.”

Dr. Ericilda Ottley Herman, acting insular superintendent for the St. Croix district, admitted that “the level of aggression that we are experiencing is different,” and cited the Department of Education’s commitment to providing “behavioral intervention services.” Alternatives to suspension, she said, are also being identified. “What we’re seeing is that we need to send a student who is suspended to behavioral intervention or anger management courses,” explained the superintendent. She told lawmakers that efforts are also being made to garner support from parents.

For Superintendent Ottley Herman, one of the DOE’s priorities is to “deal with the mental health of our students,” acknowledging that trauma could be at the root of many school fights or outbursts. When Mr. Francis expressed his fear for the safety of teachers and school monitors, Mrs. Wells-Hedrington returned the focus to the children. “We recognize that when students display aggressive behavior, it’s more than just what we see on the surface. We have to find additional remedies for them.” An ongoing partnership with the Department of Health is ensuring behavioral support services are available in schools, while principals are being urged to come up with strategies to deal with conflict resolution.

Direct, short-term measures are also being considered. “We’re going to begin to have the conversation around the usage of cell phones in our schools. Originally it was so that they could have a technological resource that they could use to enhance their instructional experience, [but] it’s becoming a hazard,” revealed the commissioner.

Current efforts to tamp down on school violence include recruiting more school monitors, particularly at St. Croix Educational Complex where training efforts are ongoing. New safety equipment is also being purchased, since “monitors are in a situation where they’re actually using their bodies to break up fights,” the commissioner told lawmakers. “It’s a community issue. It’s a parent issue. It’s a school issue,” bemoaned Mrs. Wells-Hedrington.

While Sen. Diane Capehart commended the Department of Education for taking a proactive approach, Sen. Kenneth Gittens declared that interventions need to start within the family. “We’re sitting here to say we need to take back our schools. I’m gonna tell your parents to take back your homes first,” he warned. Addressing listening parents, Mr. Gittens, a former police officer, noted: “Once you have control of your home, then I should not be seeing a school safety plan coming from the Department of Education telling me that we want to equip our monitors with body armor bulletproof vests, tear resist resistant arm protectors, [and] body cams....What are we creating?”

Student safety concerns in the Virgin Islands aren’t just limited to fisticuffs in schools. Alina Poyah, a student of the John H Woodson Junior High School, reminded lawmakers of a [February 2023 shooting](#) involving a pellet gun. “Even though it was not an automatic gun, a BB gun is still a gun and some of my classmates were physically injured,” she reminded listeners. She expressed her opinion that the incident was “pushed under the rug” and called for renewed attention “to secure the individuals responsible for this violent act on our campus.”