

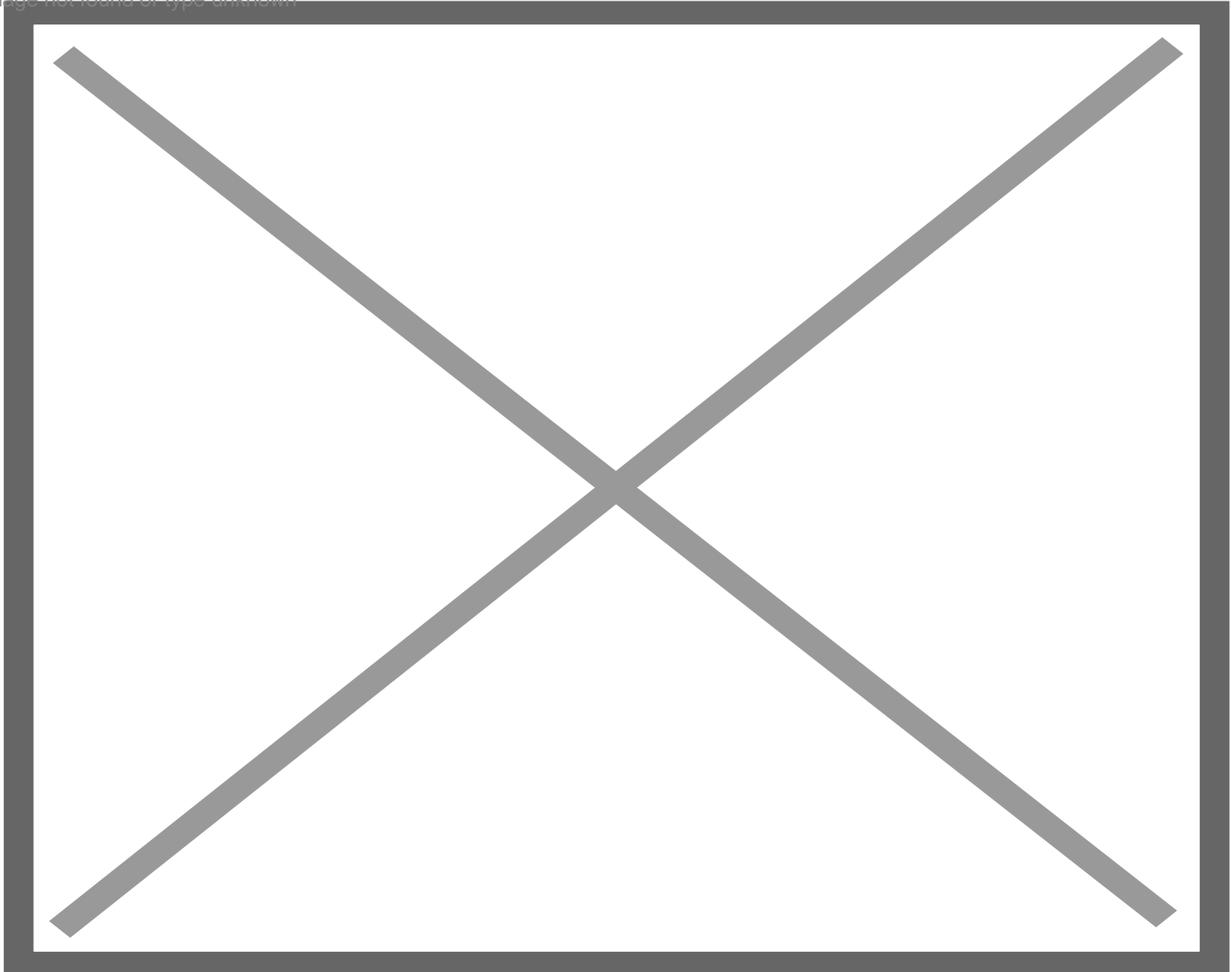
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3 Guns Found in VI Public Schools In February, Slipping Through Weak Security Measures

Education / **Published On February 21, 2020 03:43 AM /**

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A number of fights broke out on the Charlotte Amalie Campus on Dec. 16, 2015, prompting a VIPD response. By. ERNICE GILBERT/ VI CONSORTIUM

In early February the Ivanna Eudora Kean High School was on lock down at the end of the day while the Red Hook campus was searched for firearms. A student had been taken into custody in connection with a robbery. The boy [had a gun and ammunition in his possession](#) on school grounds, police said.

A week later, a night school student brought a gun to Charlotte Amalie High School and tried to hide the weapon on the school campus. Earlier this week, personnel at St. Croix's Central High School discovered a student armed with a pellet gun.

The separate incidents have set off alarms throughout the Virgin Islands communities, and among top law enforcement and schools officials. “That concerns us as an administration, as a police unit, as a community,” said V.I. Police Commissioner Trevor Velinor. “It’s so important for us to have an environment where students feel safe.”

“Our academic progression of our students, our intellectual growth does not happen unless they feel safe,” said Racquel Berry-Benjamin, commissioner of the Department of Education. “Weaponry on our school campuses. That’s very disturbing as we are in the business of educating.”

Mr. Velinor, Mrs. Berry-Benjamin and Chief Deputy Attorney General Joseph Ponteen each play a policy, and to some degree a primary, role in keeping schools gun-free and safe. They spoke during a press conference on St. Croix Thursday about a clear rise in violence in schools. While there have been no school shootings in recent history, guns are in the classrooms and [the number of fights between students](#) has escalated dangerously, officials acknowledged.

As noted several times Thursday, little statistical data has been collected about the prevalence of guns in Virgin Islands' schools. The public has no idea whether the three recent incidents are just a hint of what's to come, or an anomaly.

But anecdotally, something disturbing is happening. Fist fights appear to be on the rise in VI schools — [just open Facebook](#) and other social media channels to see the conflicts as they unfold.

Asked if students could be arming themselves with firearms to protect themselves from other school violence, Mrs. Berry-Benjamin said there is “no statistical data on that,” but she acknowledge that could be the case.

“That could be a fair assumption, given the number of fights and weaponry,” Mrs. Berry-Benjamin said. “But I would say fights have always occurred on our school campuses. What scares me is that with technology today” where fights are recorded and posted to social media.

It was unclear how many schools have the hand-held metal device that can detect items such as firearms. While Mrs. Berry-Benjamin said the schools do not have them, the education department’s school safety manager, Jaime Roebuck, said some school monitors, indeed, do have metal detection wands. “But currently there is a shortage.... The metal detectors are not to find guns. It's just a precautionary measure that we have," he said.

Mrs. Berry-Benjamin said there is an ongoing debate within the Department of Education about whether walk-through metal detectors — such as at a courthouses or government buildings — are appropriate in the school setting. “Do we want our schools to mimic a prison?” the debate goes, the commissioner said.

A Holistic Approach to Addressing the Issue

“As a police department we are serious about arresting, and we are going to work with the AG (Attorney General’s Office) to get those individuals who possess weapons in our schools prosecuted,” Mr. Velinor said.

Chief Deputy Attorney General Ponteen said the Department of Justice is keenly aware that the youth of the territory are a valuable resource. “We have to believe that if we believe in the future of our Virgin Islands community,” he said.

To that end, Mr. Ponteen reminded parents that the Department of Justice has resources available to them if they have children or young people in their lives who present problems beyond the routine challenges of youth.

The Person In Need of Supervision (PINS) program is one such resource, he said. “We want when a parent sees that a child is not developing as a child should, they come to the Department of Justice and say ‘we need some help.’ ”

The PINS program, in essence, brings to the table the courts, the VIDOJ, counselors and other human services, as needed, to intervene before the child becomes a part of the juvenile justice system, or worse.

See Something, Say Something

“We want to know where these guns are coming from,” Mr. Velinor said. “We want to be able to research, we want to investigate... The biggest value for us is those individuals who say something when they see something. It is so important.”

The Charlotte Amalie High School came to light when someone who saw something alerted police. Tips from the public are, in fact, perhaps the best resource law enforcement and school officials have.

“Because the community said something, our students today are even more safe than they were,” said Mrs. Berry-Benjamin. “See something, say something. ... A child’s life, a teacher, a staff member, a school monitor’s life, all of our lives today are safer because someone said something.”

School assemblies and smaller students sessions are used to counsel students to “speak up ... and to make sure they are not being influenced by other students or others outside of our school campuses who are looking to endanger others,” the Education commissioner said.

On March 19, schools and first responder agencies will participate in an active shooter drill across the territory, Commissioners Velinor and Berry Benjamin said.