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Broader Child Abuse Report Published, But Specific Failures in Coach Smith Case Remain Unexamined

While a comprehensive review highlights systemic issues in abuse reporting within V.I. schools, there has been no investigation into the specific lapses that allowed Bruce Smith to exploit students for years at Charlotte Amalie High School

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The Charlotte Amalie High School, where Bruce Smith was a coach for over three decades.

A long-promised report on sex abuse reporting in the public school system has now been published. An external review of the V.I. Dept. of Education, said the Praed Foundation, authors of the report, was commissioned “due to an allegation of chronic and largely unreported sexual

abuse by a school official.” While stopping short of naming the official, the language appears to refer to Bruce Smith, a former [long-time high school coach](#) who was sentenced to 35 years in prison this April for child sexual exploitation offense.

The Foundation’s characterization of the impetus for their review directly contradicts a Government House statement announcing the publication of the report, in which Governor Albert Bryan Jr. insists that the audit is “not related to any specific case or event” but merely part of the administration’s “ongoing commitment to safeguarding the Territory’s youth and ensuring accountability within the school system.”

Discrepancies in origin aside, the 21-page report makes some key findings, chiefly that “the small, close-knit island community created a context where professionals and students did not feel safe reporting concerns.” Those interviewed cited confidentiality concerns, feeling like the risk of retaliation or the leakage of personal information was a barrier to reporting. A complex web of additional factors include deficiencies on the legislative, community, district, school, professional and family levels.

“Laws governing child protection do not reflect current best practices,” the report found. The normalized use of corporal punishment — a form of physical discipline used to correct or control behavior — also contributes to a difficulty in identifying and disclosing abuse, investigators also found. A lack of information-sharing and coordination between relevant agencies compounds the issue, as does the lack of “youth-friendly” means to report abuse and the lack of centralized reporting mechanisms for child abuse.

A training gap also exists among counselors and other school staff. Similarly, a lack of established, uniform policies across public schools hinders reporting. As a result, “youth experience abuse undetected by school professionals and unknown to child protection” agencies, the review found.

The report makes eight key recommendations aimed at improving the identification and reporting of potential child abuse to the Department of Human Services, as well as safeguarding students from abuse in the first place.

First, authorities must develop clear policies and guidelines for referring suspected child abuse cases to DHS. A single hotline and online tool for reporting should be established, preferably operated by DHS. The school counselor’s role in the identification and reporting process for child abuse or neglect must be clarified. Any Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) model used in schools must be trauma-informed and involve the counselors, the auditors recommend.

This is “an opportunity for VIDE to improve classroom management while also increasing staff skills related to abuse and neglect,” the report argues. Communication between VIDE and DHS must be improved, and additional safeguards are needed to protect students, including education on bodily autonomy and policies on how and when adult staff are allowed to be alone with students.

Apart from this broad-based review from the Praed Foundation, there is yet to be any discussion of the specific failures in reporting which led Coach Smith to be able to prey on young students of the Charlotte Amalie High School for years despite swirling rumors and expressed parental concerns. It is currently unclear whether a separate investigation into the specifics of that matter will be held.

