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With Nearly 6,000 Aggressive Incidents Since 2015, Dept. of Education Unveils 10-Point Plan to Address School Violence

VIDE says violence has become an “albatross” for schools, with nearly 60% of discipline infractions tied to aggression. A 10-point plan calls for interagency councils, parental accountability, mediation, mental health support, & stronger campus security.

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Lockers line a school hallway, one of the common areas where tensions among students can escalate into fights. By. GETTY IMAGES.

The V.I. Department of Education says it is taking a strong stance against school violence and is prepared to roll out a “comprehensive plan” to tackle the issue.

Violence in the public school system is considered an “albatross on the necks of schools, especially at the secondary level,” by the Department of Education, said Assistant Commissioner Victor Somme III. He and several of his VIDE colleagues appeared before the Committee on Education and Workforce Development on Friday, where Mr. Somme reminded those listening that “addressing this albatross is not the sole responsibility of the Virgin Islands Department of Education.” Instead, students, parents, the V.I. Police Department, the Department of Human Services, the Office of Gun Violence Prevention, and the Housing Authority are all expected to get involved.

Available data on school suspensions “makes the point for the need for evidence-based, strategic, and a structured, consistent approach to address student behavior,” Mr. Somme said. Between 2015 and 2021, VIDE reported 5,716 infractions of the Student Discipline Policy. Almost 60% were “consistent with aggressive behaviors, including fighting, nonsexual harassment, and intimidation. In the recently concluded school year, VIDE reported 574 infractions resulting in suspension across the territory. A total of 328 were recorded in the St. Thomas/St. John district.

A desire to curb these behaviors is why VIDE has developed a 10-point strategic plan that will “employ as many strategies as necessary to prevent and reduce acts of student violence,” the assistant commissioner disclosed.

Plans include “standing up an Interagency School Safety Council” for decision making, data sharing, and “rapid problem-solving,” Mr. Somme said. VIDE will also develop a school-based threat assessment and case management system, and a climate and behavior framework to reduce aggression and catch problems early.

Parent partnership hubs and family accountability will ensure that caregivers are integrated into the solutions framework in a tangible way. VIDE will also focus on mediation and leadership, intending to empower students in acting early to diffuse conflict, Mr. Somme outlined. The department will also integrate law enforcement with youth-centric training and will promote mental health, substance abuse, and wraparound services, he said. The latter is intended to treat the root cause of antisocial behavior, including trauma, grief, and drug use. The department will prioritize after-school activities to keep students engaged during what they say are “peak incident hours” of 3:00 pm to 6:00 p.m.

Another strategy involves digital risk and rumor control, and anonymous reporting, to prevent students from bringing online conflicts to campus. Finally, VIDE said it will ensure that school compounds are well-monitored by utilizing surveillance cameras and conducting security audits.

“All I ask is that at least we make some priority of this issue,” was Senator Novelle Francis’s appeal. He and other lawmakers repeatedly emphasized the need to stamp out violence in the territory’s schools. “We don’t want to be at the back end of this...where it becomes a real crisis for us,” he warned. Sen. Francis urged VIDE to be forthcoming if additional funding is required to implement the outlined plans.

Meanwhile, lawmakers were also concerned about violence originating from outside of the schools. A spate of school shootings on the mainland has heightened anxiety.

For Senator Kenneth Gittens, school safety must be top of mind when the new schools are being designed. “I’m seeing that you’re leaning towards that side of having so much glass,” he noted, referring to renderings for schools that are due to be rebuilt. A former law enforcement officer, Mr. Gittens raised points about the need for bulletproof surfaces and active-shooter drills.

Noting that she was “not the architect”, VIDE commissioner Dionne Wells-Hedrington promised to “look into” the prospect of more hardened school designs. According to Commissioner Wells-Hedrington, design decisions were made based on a desire to incorporate “natural light into the classroom.”

Lawmakers questioned the wisdom of such a philosophy. “If that is the plan, get rid of the plan,” demanded committee chair Senator Kurt Vialet. “Nobody have all glass. You could just look into a classroom and see every single student.” Mr. Vialet also suggested that having transparent walls could worsen behavioral issues. “Students acting out, they see their friend passing, and they’re waving. Let’s get rid of that distraction,” he advised.

Senator Gittens has suggested that natural light could pour in from overhead, instead of through glass walls. “Having all this glass, it’s going to be counter-productive,” he warned.

Senator Vialet joined Senator Gittens in stressing the need to install intercom systems that allow individual classes to contact the office and vice versa in the event of an isolated emergency. Currently, only a few schools have intercom systems, but their capabilities are limited. It is expected that the new schools will incorporate more advanced systems and safer infrastructure than what currently obtains.