

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Fumes Dominate Discussion at Central's PTSA Meeting

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Just before 5:30 on Wednesday evening, a few women could be seen trickling into a modest building--the school's library--to attend Central High's first Parent Teacher Student Association (PTSA) meeting of the 2014-2015 school year.

But, by 5:35 p.m., the place had started to fill up so fast that several of the male students accompanying their parents were given the task of setting out additional chairs to accommodate the steady stream of people coming through the doors. Soon, the room had swelled to capacity and countless attendees found themselves standing between bookshelves and leaning against walls just to get in on what appeared to be the beginning of something great.

It was clear the PTSA's leadership had come to lead and attendees had come to get down to the business of ensuring a successful school year at Central High.



PTSA's secretary, the meeting began with the PTSA's secretary taking the floor to present his monthly report.

PTSA Vice President Daren "Bogle" Stevens

First on Stevens' agenda--the chaotic scene that unfolded just eight days into the new school year, when, on Sept. 9, some students and staff reported smelling fumes on the campus.

At any other school on St. Croix, this may not have been cause for panic, but with Central High just returning to its campus after being closed from March through the remainder of the last school year due to a noxious odor that had engulfed the school grounds--sickening and hospitalizing students and staff--many feared those same fumes had returned. Thus, some students and staff were taken to a building away from the smell. Other students began filing out of classes to call their parents. Not to mention, the news spread fast on social media.

Recounting his arrival at the school last Tuesday, Stevens described the scene.

"I came, I didn't get any resistance, per se, and I was able to meet with the principal and staff members to let us know what was going on," he said.

So, exactly what was going on at Central on Sept. 9?

"At that point, no one knew what the situation was, but they knew it was a scent," Stevens explained. He went on to say that an evacuation plan that was supposed to be in effect in the event of such an emergency at the school, did not appear to be in place when he arrived on the campus that day. Stevens said he learned of the plan at a

previous meeting he attended with VITEMA and the heads of other emergency agencies on the island.

"To my knowledge, I didn't see it happening," he said of the evacuation plan. "Maybe there is a reason why, but I do not know."

Stevens then raised a related point regarding the welfare of students in the event of another large-scale emergency, questioning why there wasn't a "school-based clinic" on Central High's campus.

"We know that Education Complex does have one, and I came to understand that it's through a grant," Stevens said. "But what I'm saying is with the situation that happened, and because of where the school is located, why doesn't the school have a school-based clinic?" He pointed out that he and other PTSA officers plan to arrange a meeting with CHS administrators and other pertinent officials to see about bringing a medical clinic to the campus.

Before addressing these and other concerns brought to light in Stevens' report, Central High Principal Janasee Sinclair, happy to be back on the school's campus after three months of a double-session schedule at the Ed. Complex last spring, said, "Even though we were housed by Complex, and I thank them so much, it's good to be back in your own home."

Then, addressing the events of Sept. 9, she explained that she did not smell the odor that day while at a meeting, upon learning of what was happening outside, she emerged from her meeting. Soon, Sinclair said, she and other emergency personnel who had arrived on the scene observed the direction of the wind, based on the motion of the flags at the front of the school--an important detail that helped rule out the idea that the odor had originated on the campus.



"The wind was coming from the southeast," Sinclair explained, motioning to an area off campus toward the old Vialco plant and beyond. "It was a wiff of propane gas. It wasn't on the campus; it was coming from off campus."

She confirmed that emergency personnel checked the campus to "see if what happened last school year was happening again this year, and they found that it was something else. It was not the H₂S gas; it was propane they were smelling."

Sinclair went on to say that the "entire perimeter" of Central High's campus was checked, particularly areas where propane is used.

"We checked the cooking room, it wasn't coming from there; and we checked the cafeteria, and it wasn't from there," she said.

Sinclair said those that responded to the scene--Public Works, DPNR, fire department, Waste Management, VITEMA and the VI department of Education--eventually went into nearby communities to assess the source of the smell. However, its origin still remains a mystery.

"To date, I have no report of where [the smell] was coming from," she said. "It came on the campus and then it went right back off. I am still awaiting a report from the government agencies that came in."

CHS Evacuation Plan

It was only after last week's incident that Sinclair said the school called an emergency in-house meeting with staff to "set up a plan for evacuation from fumes, et cetera," which was "attached to our regular emergency plan."

Pedro Parrilla, assistant principal, explained that Central's new 'fumes evacuation plan' consists of the creation of four teams, made up of faculty and staff, that would be activated in the event another incident occurred. He said a monitoring team would direct students; a medical team would tend to sick students or staff until professional help could arrive; an information team stationed at the front gate would engage the public; and a team would be stationed at the "safety zone," a designated area students will be sent until the threat has passed or other action is decided upon.

"Just about everyone will know what to do if we have an incident," he said. "We had meetings with students by grade level and we are meeting with our teams so that we can all be on the same page, if there is an incident in the future."

Sinclair added, "If something happens again, we will know how to act and not react."

The principal also pointed out that school was not dismissed early that day, although some parents arrived to pick up their children. After the smell had subsided, classes resumed as normal.

The Work Ahead

Of Stevens' inquiry into having a school-based medical center established on Central's campus, Sinclair said when she worked at the Ed. Complex, she was involved in bringing the medical center to that school.

"That was a pilot program and that was a grant; that was a onetime thing," she explained. "Of course we can look into it and see if that can be done at Central High School, but we have to have people working on the team day and night to make sure we can get the money for that particular health center on this campus."

The issue of Central's football team being sacked this year was also of concern to attendees.

"For us to have a football team, we have to purchase new equipment from helmet all the way down," Sinclair said. "At present, Central High School does not have the money to do that."

Sinclair said the equipment is very costly, and as late as last year and as recent as last week, she had still been researching ways to get the team suited up again, saying that the funds would have to come from the government, education department or an outside donor.

"Our helmets are out of compliance and I will not be the principal that puts a child on the field with helmets that are out of compliance," she said.

To that, Sinclair lightheartedly suggested that if the team misses the traditional football season, with St. Croix's year-round tropical climate, football could be played at anytime of the year.



By the Numbers

Enrollment is up this year at Central High. On Sept. 2, the number of students enrolled was "1,078 and counting," Sinclair revealed.

In addition, she pointed out that the school's bilingual program is back on track with the hiring of an ESL teacher.

"There is now a bilingual supervisor in the [school] district, so we are working on building our program all over again," Sinclair explained.

While there are some faculty vacancies, she said teaching staff is up to par in the science, history and math departments.

Sinclair also encouraged parents with children enrolled in advanced classes to let those youngsters remain in those classes.

"A lot of parents want me to take their children out of AP and Honors classes," she said, "but you can't want your child to be great if you don't give them the tools to be great. You sent them to school to learn and you need to challenge them."

Parents in attendance expressed particular concern with the disappointing VITAL proficiency test scores the high school received at the close of the last school year. Sinclair said she believed the low scores had to do with the move to the Ed. Complex.

"We moved," she said. "Personally, I did not want us to take the test, and I'll tell you why. My children were traumatized, and I believe, it was too soon. They were not settled."

Carib Pride

Stevens encouraged more students to get involved in Central's PTSA in order to highlight the issues that are important to them. And, with last night's turn out of parents and students, he is hopeful for the year ahead.

"I am somewhat impressed [with the turn out]," he said, "but there's also room for improvement. I think the word will get around that we're trying to get the school pride back, so that's what we're pushing for."

Sinclair agreed, "There are a lot of parents getting involved in their children's education. It's great for me to see parents who are interested in what's going on in the school and what's going on in the environment around the school. Let us work hard to have a safe and healthy environment, and [provide] a comprehensive education for our children."

Central High's PTSA meets once each month in the school's library. For more information, contact the main office at (340) 778-0123.

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