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Dept. of Education Announces Initiatives to Address School Safety, Seeks Funding For Campus Security Bureau

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The Ivanna Eudroa Kean High School was on lockdown and bags searched on Thursday, Sept. 1, 2022.

The V.I. Dept. of Education said Friday it has announced a series of initiatives to ensure the safety of students and school staff, and to shed light on the department's actions in light of the recent spike in altercations on secondary school campuses.

According to D.O.E., plans consist of a comprehensive program that provides social and emotional supports to help students better manage their emotions, and the ongoing buildout of safety systems and procedures across all school campuses.

During a Facebook Live presentation on Wednesday, Education Commissioner Nominee Dr. Dionne Wells-Hedrington brought together school and district officials for an open discussion on school safety.

“At the Department of Education, we have a zero-tolerance policy, so students aren’t going to be allowed to disrupt the day-to-day operations of our schools to interrupt teaching and learning,” Wells-Hedrington said. “But we do understand the Department of Education has a responsibility to provide education to our children, to ensure the child develops on the whole. That means, we are focusing more on social-emotional learning—we are trying to meet students where they are and take them to where we need them to be.”

Social-Emotional Learning

Four tiers of intervention are planned:

- Level I – all students receive instruction on self-awareness, how to plan for their future, and other topics relevant to their success
- Level II – students receive all Level I services, in addition to therapeutic intervention. These students have not gotten into physical altercations, but may have challenges with peer relations, communication, verbal altercations, and classroom behaviors. Parents are notified and tips are shared with parents.
- Level III – intense interventions are offered through professional counseling services. In-school suspensions will occur where students receive academics along with counseling services during the school day. Counseling will be tailored to the specific needs of the students. Students will learn about their triggers and how to manage them. Follow-up is required with school success specialist to ensure students continue on the right path.
- Level IV – this is for repeat offenders. Based on the severity of the infraction, will allow for out-of-school suspension. When students return to school, they will receive targeted interventions, based on their individual issues. Professional counselors will provide counseling services to students. Students will continue to be tracked to ensure their success. They will be required to present a document they have worked on with the professional counselor to show their progress.
- Creation of a comprehensive professional school counselors’ counseling plan
- Strategies for increased parental involvement, including emphasis on father/male caregiver involvement
- Disability awareness training
- Conflict resolution workshops
- Achievers Academy – provide high-risk students with coaching, job placement, resume writing, mentorship, tutoring, and career counseling
- Formation of Edibles Taskforce – partnerships with VIPD, VIDO, Human Services, and Licensing & Consumer Affairs to educate students and the community on the dangers of edibles consumption in children and teens
- “Positive Vibes Alone” workshops that guide students on how to make good choices in refusing the use of illicit drugs (held at St. Croix secondary and junior high schools the week of Aug. 22; workshops are being planned for St. Thomas-St. John District schools)

School Safety & Disaster Planning

- This summer, the Department enlisted the support of the V.I. Fire Service, EMS, VIPD, and Rescue to conduct a comprehensive safety assessment of all public-school campuses to identify deficiencies – plans are moving ahead to install proper panic systems, lighting, fencing, camera systems, etc., throughout the campuses
- Monthly training for monitors and school staff by Louisiana State University and Bureau of Corrections on topics, such as surviving an active threat, de-escalation, and proper defense techniques
- Training partnerships with VITEMA and FEMA Region 2 to address active shooter threats
- Engagement with the National School Advocacy Council
- Annual attendance at the National School Safety Conference to learn what other districts are doing, share what the VIDE is doing, and to improve VIDE’s planning and preparation
- Hiring of Dean of Students at all secondary schools to enforce school policies set by the Virgin Islands Board of Education
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“We have learned from Uvalde and we do not want what happened in Uvalde and other schools and districts on the mainland to happen here,” Assistant Commissioner Victor Somme III said, according to the department. “We know our strengths and weaknesses as it pertains to the safety of our building facilities, and we are moving in the direction to secure and ensure those deficiencies are met.”

D.O.E. said that in an emergency meeting with Sen. Genevieve Whitaker and other members of the 34th Legislature on Thursday, Wells-Hedrington requested additional funding from legislators for the creation of a Campus Security Bureau that would provide safety enforcement on all school campuses. Furthermore, to ensure the hiring of more school monitors, funding was also requested to cover the \$1,000 fee required for applicants to undergo a psychological evaluation.

During a lockdown and search conducted by the VIPD on Sept. 1 at Charlotte Amalie High School, knives, scissors, and brass knuckles were confiscated; guns were not found. During a subsequent search and lockdown of Ivanna Eudora Kean High School the same day, no contraband was discovered, the department said.

“We want to ensure our students, employees and the community that we are doing our due diligence and will continue to work closely with VIPD to address unwarranted behaviors by some students on our school campuses,” Wells-Hedrington said. “This isn’t a VIDE problem, but a community issue that can be fixed and will be fixed if we work together. We welcome the involvement of all stakeholders to ensure that we create safe and welcoming learning spaces at our schools.”