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Dept. of Education Says Parental Involvement Needed to Curb Violence Among Youth

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Students at the St. Croix Educational Complex High School. By. V.I. CONSORTIUM

“You make the choice but you don’t get to determine the consequence,” Dr. Stefan Jurgen, the insular superintendent for the St. Thomas/St. John District said as he cautioned students, who he described as behaving unruly at schools.

He was one of many educators who spoke out against the recent bouts of fighting at campuses across the territory during a meeting held by the V.I. Department of Education on Thursday. Members of the department were appealing to parents to be more present in their children’s school lives in an effort to reduce the instances of violence.

"We need to work together. Don't sit and say it's not my child. One day it might be your child, so we need your help; we are begging; we are pleading with the public. Help us to curtail this violence that's going on, on our school campus," urged Principal of the St. Croix Central High School, Yves Abraham.

Within the first month of the 2023 school year, [a surge in violent fights](#) led to the arrest of at least three students at the St. Croix Educational Complex on St. Croix, and the threat of a shootout at the Charlotte Amalie High School in St. Thomas.

Carla Bastian, deputy superintendent of schools for the St. Croix District said the recent infractions had been of the most serious levels recognized by the department's regulations. "The amount of infractions that we have seen thus far falls on the spectrum of the level four infractions based on the Board of Education policies," she stated, noting that repeat offenders risk expulsion.

Dr. Dionne Wells-Hedrington, Education commissioner nominee suggested that a lot of what has been happening at school over the years have been a result of situations that stem from outside of school and are brought on to the campus. "What we need our parents to do is to speak to your children; what we need the community to do is to be alert and vigilant when you see things transpiring with our students outside of our premises, to inform us so that we could always be prepared to deal with situations when they arise."

She said efforts must also be made to address the root causes of these incidents. "We've got to cure the root in order to change the behaviors and the mindset of our children. I believe every child could be good; I believe that every child has the potential to be great but along the way our community and the influences of life has changed our students' trajectory especially those that are fighting and displaying all of this aggression – there's a reason for that."

"So while we are protecting the masses, we still want the community to know we've got to focus on what it is that is causing that child or those children to act outside the norm," Ms. Wells-Hedrington concluded.

"Every day we're in the schools and we're talking to these kids. We're mentoring them, we're trying our best to find out the underlying issues; we're trying to treat them as fair as we can but I'm asking the parents more than anything else, please form a relationship with the staff," encouraged Jamie Roebuck, director of School Safety.

Recognizing the need to quickly deal with the growing incidents, Mr. Jurgen said that while all students are entitled to due process when they flout the rules, alternative facilities may need to be considered for students unwilling to comply with school policy. Educators listed the consumption of edibles on compound, inappropriate use of cellphones and improper attire among their concerns.

"We have no place for it in our schools. Our children are far behind and the time must be spent bringing them up to speed. Most of our children are not reading at grade level [and] that's the focus we have at the Department of Education," said Mr. Jurgen.

"So if there are some folks in the mix that cannot make the cut and cannot understand, after all this time of being away, then maybe we have to find an alternate placement for them to be able to get their schooling done," he stressed.

Xiomara Herman, deputy superintendent on St. Croix said one alternative program – Positive Connections — would involve a mixture of academics and building social emotional wellness

among at-risk youth.

“The students there not only receive their academics but they take part in what we call small group sessions. They build relationships with the individuals who are there – the adults and amongst themselves,” she noted.

According to Ms. Herman, the school is not where students will graduate from but it will become a safe place to help troubled students get back on the right path and be placed back at their home schools.

Desha Powell, deputy superintendent in the St Thomas/St John District said the department will also monitor the trends at schools and tighten security measures where necessary.

“We’re also looking forward to the students who really are fed up of this behavior to actually report when they know something is happening in the neighborhood – something that we need to know about so that we can actually be vigilant on our campuses,” she explained.

Erwin Mason, director of Disaster Planning and Security said efforts to enhance security measures will include updating systems, offering behavioral training for all staff to identify the issues with children, and training students on Cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR). The department on Friday [announced its plan](#) to enhance school security.