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# Local Leaders Explore Options to Eliminate Bullying and Violence at Schools During Debut Forum

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Education and law enforcement officials offered up numerous ideas that they believe will reduce instances of violence and bullying at schools in the U.S. Virgin Islands, during Thursday's Weed and Seed Program's first Crime Prevention Forum hosted by the V.I. Police Department.

The forum, which focused on the topic "Bullying and the School to Prison Pipeline", brought together a panel comprising of Karen Chancellor, acting deputy commissioner at the V.I. Department of Education, Ray A. Martinez, commissioner at the VIPD, Judge Jessica Gallivan, Senators Novelle Francis and Franklin Johnson, and former Senator Diane T. Capehart.

The group voiced their suggestions to reduce increasing cases of behavioral issues at schools across the territory and fielded questions from members of the public who were in attendance.

Implementing anger management training, adopting individualized solutions; installing therapeutic and guidance counselors at schools were among ideas shared.

But perhaps one of the most prominent proactive measures which was offered by a few contributors, was the need to identify the root cause of the problems that lead to student misbehavior.

Ivan Mason, director for Disaster Planning and School Security strongly believes that the issues start at home, and he pleaded with parents and guardians to have conversations with their children.

“We need to find out what's the problem. Have a conversation with them because they will tell you. They will tell you there is something deeper than school,” he said.

In order to successfully reach these students, Mr. Mason suggested that parents should also be included in the strategy to reduce delinquency and truancy.

“This should be from home to school to the pipeline to prison, not from school to prison from home. It starts at home and that's where we need to start looking at it from,” he insisted.

“And one thing that's causing the violence is we've been home for Covid for two years...” he added, commenting that confrontations that may have taken place online while students were home, are now spilling over onto school campuses.

Meanwhile, the V.I. Department of Education is actively pursuing a number of solutions to include the establishment of truancy officers, a hotline to anonymously report cases of delinquency and obtaining cameras to be placed at every school in the territory, Mr. Mason made known.

In addition, monitors are being trained on how to deal with situations that happen within the school to curtail the violence.

Ms. Chancellor, the D.O.E. acting deputy commissioner said even further to the training mentioned, the department is implementing “tiered intervention” in response to delinquent behaviors.

Monies, she said, have been set aside to hire counselors and school success specialists who will manage in-school suspension.

“We also utilizing in-school suspensions because we're not sending kids home to play video games. That's called a vacation,” she said, clarifying that out-of-school suspensions will still be utilized at times to adhere to V.I. Board of Education policy.

Guidance counselors are expected to target students who are involved in fights and host group or individual sessions to address the root causes of their aggression, which could stem from a number of factors including low academic achievement, poor parent-child interaction, exposure to drug use at an early age as well as poverty.

The USVI leads the Caribbean in incarceration rates, according to a presentation by Dr. Kimberly Mills, the executive director for the Virgin Islands Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (VIUCEDD), who quoted excerpts from VI researcher Harney & Ferrol-Haley's 2012 report. The report also stated that the USVI is the fifth in the world in terms of incarceration rates per capita.

Their research, however, found that providing increased opportunities for education to inmates lowered recidivism rates at prisons.

Sen. Johnson, a former corrections officer, suggested that prisoners could be valuable resources to stem the behavior of delinquent students.

"All hands need to be on deck ... we need to try to get the prisoners involved to start speaking to them again," he said, referring to the success of a "Scared Straight" program that he was a part of on the U.S. mainland.

Another contributor suggested that those in charge should review environmental effects on children and its role in how they choose to socialize.

A suggestion by Ms. Mills was to make classrooms a nicer place to be.

"Maybe dancers, plants, native dancers, music, native dancers, aroma therapy. I mean, we know these things work. When you go into hotels and stores, they're using all those things to get you to buy more materials. So why can't we use it to help students, you know, want to stay in school and be in school longer? All of these things, it works on our brain, whether we're conscious of it or not," she recommended.

She said too that students must be allowed to become angry without being consumed by it.

"... Sometimes anger is justified, you know, so we don't always want people to not be angry. I mean, people have a right to be angry about things."

The forum was one of many attempts to address violence and delinquency at schools. At the beginning of the 2022-2023 school year, a number of students had to be disciplined for displaying violent behavior and bullying while on the school compound. In a few cases law enforcement had to be deployed to attend to quarrels that had escalated into fights, and in some instances [students were arrested](#).