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Citing Safety Concerns, Dept. of Education Bars Students Attending Woodson From Using School's Front Lawn

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The John H. Woodson Junior High School By. V.I. CONSORTIUM

The V.I. Dept. of Education has cited safety concerns in the wake of the BB gun drive-by shooting at the John H. Woodson Jr. High School, to announce that students would no longer be allowed to congregate on the front lawn of the school during their lunch period and for other recreational activities.

The Feb. 16 incident left several students with injuries, and it frightened students who were left uncertain of what was taking place as the gunshots — sounding as if they were coming from a regular gun.

The prohibition of the front's lawn use was announced on Friday by the school's principal, Henry Mark, during a parent meeting.

“Students use our front lawn to eat their lunches, socialize and play with their peers, but we have to make changes, and the changes will be in effect today,” he said to the auditorium of approximately 150 parents, according to the Dept. of Education. “Students will no longer be able to go outside [on the front lawn] during their lunch period. They will remain in the campus, in the courtyard area, the cafeteria area, in the front office area, in the auditorium, as well as in the library area.”

Mr. Mark also announced that the school’s exit gate will remain closed after school buses depart the campus in the morning, only allowing for the campus’s main gate to remain open during the school day. He further stated that the school’s visitation policy will be updated to provide more information on how school lockdowns are managed.

“Our primary goal at John H. Woodson Jr. High School is the safety of our students, faculty, and staff, and we will take whatever measures we need to take in order to achieve that objective,” he said.

The Dept. of Education said its commissioner offered an impassioned plea to parents and the public, saying that she “won’t stop” until the suspects are caught. She pointed out that the Woodson decision could also be enacted territory-wide due to the open design of schools.

“This is a serious day in the Virgin Islands, one that we don’t take lightly,” Dr. Dionne Wells-Hedrington, commissioner, said. “Commissioner Martinez may not know me well, but he’ll get to know me well soon. I’m not stopping until someone gets arrested, and we all need to take that stance.”

She added, “It bothers me that this community has not come forth yet, even with the description of that vehicle. That bothers me because it says to me that people are turning a blind eye and that they don’t want to be involved when we’re talking about the safety of our children. That’s not good. That speaks volumes for all of us here today because we cannot accept that. Our children should be able to congregate in their schools without any issues.”

According to the department, during a question-and-answer period of the meeting, some parents expressed their fear of having their children return to the campus. One parent, who said she has tried to prepare her children for emergency situations at school, said her son was grazed by one of the projectiles.

“Only when he got home and took off his jacket, that’s when we saw an injury to his elbow area,” she explained.

Other parents voiced their desire to receive text alerts, the need for video surveillance on school campuses, and have access to the school’s emergency response plan.

Police Commissioner Ray Martinez echoed Commissioner Wells-Hedrington’s call for the public’s help.

“Me getting the call that our chiefs and deputy chiefs are sending our tactical team to a school for a school-based shooting, I can tell you that I felt helpless because I was still on St. Thomas,” he said. “As I stand here today, what do I tell you, what do I tell these students who are traumatized because two idiots thought it was cool to drive by a school and fire into a crowd of children. I am

mad.”

He added, “There are two places where our kids are supposed to be safe—at home and at school. This shows that the fabric of our community continues to deteriorate for us to have things like this occur. If you have information and your kids are telling you stuff, put in the call to us. Give us the opportunity to do what we need to do.”

The VIPD released a video update early on Feb. 17 with a description of the car and suspects: a white Acura TSX or TLX with silver rims, damage on right side, two suspects, one wearing a black hoodie.

According to the release, the Department of Education’s Crisis Team, in collaboration with other partners, was activated at Woodson Jr. High to conduct small-group sessions with students. Woodson’s counseling team will continue to provide services to students in the weeks ahead. Students and staff in need of more intensive or private consultation will be given support. The Department of Health’s Behavioral Health Division will deploy its mobile unit to Woodson’s campus beginning on Tuesday, Feb. 21 to provide additional services.

The Governor’s Office of Gun Violence Prevention, St. Croix District and school safety leaders also participated in the meeting.

Anyone with information that can help solve this crime is asked to call 911 or (340) 778-2211 ext. 6140.