



THE VIRGIN ISLANDS DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Office of Public Relations

1834 Kongens Gade, Charlotte Amalie * St. Thomas * U.S. Virgin Islands 00802-6746

Telephone: 340.774.0100 Ext. 8136 Fax: 340.774.1168

340.773.1095 Ext. 7064 Fax: 340.773.4624

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Contact: Cynthia T. Graham

Director, Public Relations & Communications

(340) 773-1095, Ext. 7064

cynthia.graham@vide.vi

www.vide.vi

www.facebook.com/usvi.vide

Use of Woodson Front Lawn Discontinued for Students Due to Safety Concerns

ST. CROIX, USVI – Citing safety concerns in the wake of a BB gun drive-by shooting incident on Feb. 16 that left seven John H. Woodson Jr. High School students with minor injuries, Principal Henry Mark announced at a parent meeting on Friday, February 17 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.

“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. “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.”

Furthermore, Mark said 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 also said 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.

Education Commissioner Dr. Dionne Wells-Hedrington 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,” she 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.”

Commissioner Wells-Hedrington went on to say, “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.”

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.”

“There are two places where our kids are supposed to be safe—at home and at school,” he continued. “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.”

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. See video here: [\(16\) VIPD update on Woodson School BB Gun Incident on Feb. 16, 2023 - YouTube](#)

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.

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