

ALERT

So far this school year, GW reports 10 assault incidents to Danville police

Charles Wilborn

Sep 17, 2022



George Washington High School students return to class on the first day of school Aug. 8.
Danville Public Schools, contributed

Charles Wilborn

The day after Labor Day, a fight broke out at George Washington High School during a lunch period.

An official — described only as the director of safety and security — stepped in to break it up.

He was knocked down and his gun exposed.

A security officer quickly recovered the weapon.

That episode was explained in a Facebook post by the school later that night after “rumors and video” circulated about the incident. It just so happens that an ambulance was at the school at the same time responding to a medical emergency for an employee, adding fuel to an already tense social media situation.

This ordeal played also out two weeks after a gun was found on campus.

As of Sept. 9 — about a month into the new school year — the Danville Police Department was notified of 20 incidents reported at GW. That amounts to one-third of the total number — 60 — reported for the whole of the previous school year.

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That doesn't mean a police vehicle was dispatched to the school for each incident. Reported incidents range from things like assaults to found drugs.

The juvenile found with the weapon Aug. 23 was physically arrested, Danville Police Department Capt. Steve Richardson explained to the Register & Bee. So far this year, nine others have been charged on a juvenile petition for counts related to assault.

“Some may have been physically arrested and some released, but those terms are decided by the juvenile intake officers,” Richardson said. “One incident is still active, and a petition is being sought for assault, which the intake will decide on.”

Half of the 20 incidents GW reported to Danville police so far this year involve some form of assault. Two occurred on the day the school system posted about a fight involving the safety director being knocked to the ground and his weapon dislodged from a holster.

Last school year, 36 assault reports were relayed to the police department.

The Danville Register & Bee requested data on altercations so far this year and also ones last year.

“Anecdotally, administrators report 10-14 physical altercations this school year to date,” Lanie Davis, a spokesperson for Danville Public Schools, told the Register & Bee on Friday. “Otherwise, our information system does not provide a report of incident data.”

School leaders aren’t sure the root cause of these fights that were a problem even before the pandemic turned the education world upside down.

“An analysis of the causes has not yet been conducted,” Davis said.

When asked how many injuries have occurred this year at the hands of physical altercations, Davis confirmed there were “multiple injuries in school daily,” in an email, but said the school system did not have data available on the cause of those injuries.

Stepping up protection

After the weapon discovery on GW’s campus last month, school officials have stepped up security efforts. That includes metal detectors at every entrance.

Before that incident, there were detectors in use since classes resumed Aug. 8, Davis said. However, in that situation “students were chosen to go through at intervals, such as every 10th student for example,” she said.

In the hours and days after the gun was found, the Danville Police Department beefed up presence in the school.

“The police department has school resource officers assigned to George Washington High School and a School Safety Support program where officers randomly walk through schools around the city when time permits to add another layer of security and deterrence,” Richardson explained. “The firearm being on school grounds was an unfortunate incident, but the planning, training, and preparation to respond to critical incidents or any criminal matter are in place to allow for a planned response to any emergency at George Washington High School.”

Danville police take a close look at all threats and adjust the response accordingly.

“The single incident did not change the preparedness to respond, but much intelligence gathering, and sharing has occurred this school year to ensure a proper level of police presence is at the school,” Richardson said.

The role of police

While the Danville Police Department is a partner with Danville Public Schools, there’s a wide range of responsibilities — and limits — for all involved.

For example, school resource officers and members of the police force have to stay within the confines of state and federal law when it comes to search and detention, according to Richardson.

“School Resource Officers and sworn police personnel can only become involved in violations of law within the school setting while school administrators, school security officers, and teachers are responsible for school discipline,” he explained.

Simply put, for police, they must follow standards for probable cause. School officials, on the other hand, have what Richardson described as “lower thresholds for working to secure schools” as they feel is appropriate.

“The Danville Police Department identifies threats, investigates criminal activity, and acts to ensure the safety of everyone within the school should a threat become apparent,” Richardson wrote in a statement. “When the school leadership requests a matter be handled criminally or when a criminal matter occurs in front of an officer, school resource officers handle those cases as criminal incidents and obtain juvenile petitions when appropriate.”

The solution

Behavior issues have plagued the Danville high school for years. In 2015, a student wrote a letter to the editor the newspaper published detailing ways teens would talk over teachers, check phones and walk over desks.

A year later, Danville Public Schools pointed to progress with a **drop in discipline referrals**.

Then in 2021, worried parents voiced concern to Superintendent Angela Hairston over growing problems. That particular meeting at GW’s auditorium was scheduled to focus on the opening of schools. However, it came days after Danville police were summoned to GW for a fight.

Parents attending that meeting last year pointed to the ongoing altercations. One compared a fight in the school’s gym — captured on video and circulated through social media channels — to watching a boxing match at home.

When it comes to gangs, Danville police are working to avert activity in the streets and schools. However, Davis said the school system does not track gang members.

“The Danville Police Department Gang and Violent Crime Unit meets with community partners including the school system to identify youth who may be a threat and deter gang activity through diversion,” Richardson told the Register & Bee.

As far as changes now, Davis pointed to more mental health avenues in addition to security precautions.

“We are focusing on peer mediation and conflict management programs, as well as investing in student access to mental health services and working with our community partners to help prevent community violence,” she told the newspaper. “We have provided mentors for students, and there’s been an increase in video surveillance.”

The Danville Police Department also takes a proactive approach, Richardson said.

“SROs and Danville Youth Engagement Officers engage with the youth at GWHS to build trust, gather threat information, provide services to youth dealing with critical issues, de-escalate ongoing issues before they become a threat and provide options to gang members, all which are aimed at increasing the safety of the school,” he said.

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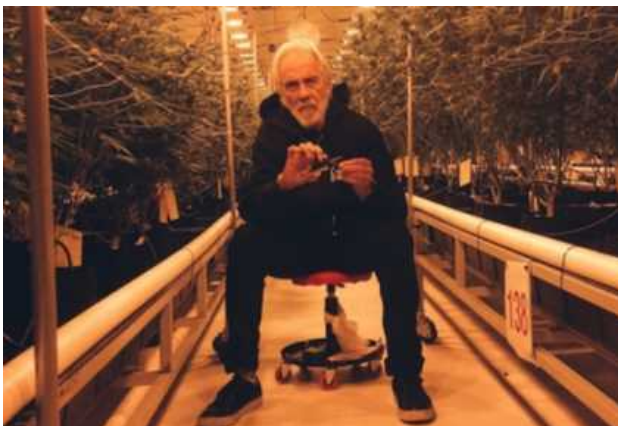
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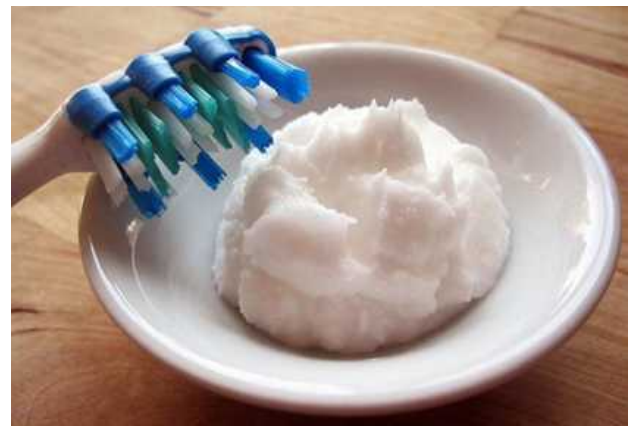
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ALERT

DANVILLE

After gun found at GW, students go through metal detectors to enter school

Charles Wilborn

Aug 27, 2022



Officers with the Danville Police Department investigate a fight reported at George Washington High School in August 2021.

Register & Bee, file

Students entering George Washington High School now must walk through metal detectors after a gun was found in the book bag of a 15-year-old this week.

Lanie Davis, a spokesperson for Danville Public Schools, confirmed the new mandate in place until further notice with the Register & Bee on Friday.

While three units have been used since classes resumed Aug. 8, a total of six will be in place starting next week.

Previously, the metal detectors were used randomly “in the interest of a smooth take in process in the morning and to not cut into instructional time,” Davis told the newspaper.

After a fight broke out Tuesday afternoon at the high school in Danville, security officers were notified one of the students involved had a handgun, the Danville Police Department reported this week.

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Police said that student was taken to what was described as a “secure office” where the firearm was located in his book bag. Authorities stressed the gun was never “displayed in a threatening manner” or discharged. No other weapons were found in a search.

Authorities sought charges of felony possession of a firearm on school grounds and underage possession of a firearm against the unnamed teenager.

Davis said safety continues to be the No. 1 priority across the school district.

“We are looking at using our current protocols more frequently and looking at additional safety technology,” she told the Register & Bee via email. “We will continue to monitor and adjust safety measures as needed.”

When asked to describe the level of security in place at the high school Tuesday, Davis spoke broadly saying the security team is comprised of administrators, security officers and school resource officers.

“We do keep other measures confidential,” she explained.

Last year, parents voiced concern to Superintendent Angela Hairston during a September meeting at GW’s auditorium that was scheduled to focus on the opening of schools. However, it came days after Danville police were summoned to GW for a fight.

Parents attending pointed to the ongoing altercations. One compared a fight in the school’s gym — captured on video and circulated through social media channels — to watching a boxing match at home.

Davis did not immediately have access to data detailing how many fights have occurred at the school this month, she told the Register & Bee on Friday.

Tech changes

Lee Vogler, a member of Danville City Council, is eying a specific technology called Evolv Express as a solution in not only GW, but all schools in Danville.

“City Council is not going to micromanage the school system but public safety is one of our fundamental responsibilities as a local government and, to me, that applies to our schools as well,” Vogler said Friday.

Evolv Express is designed to spot concealed weapons — and other threats — using a combination of advanced digital sensors and artificial intelligence, according to the company’s website.

The touchless system can screen up to 3,600 people per hour, according to the company. That’s about 10 times faster than a traditional metal detector.

“I’m glad that adjustments have been made so quickly and I look forward to discussing updating our school security systems to a 21st Century model, like Evolv, which is more effective and efficient than old fashioned metal detectors,” Vogler wrote in a message. “This is the system being used at major theme parks, emergency departments and stadiums.”

Vogler said he’s reached out to administration at Danville Public Schools and — based on his conversations — they have funds in place for a system like this at GW and Galileo Magnet High School.

“I am willing to have whatever conversations need to be had to make sure we can implement a system like this at our schools, as well as possibly adding more SROs,” he said.

New safety era

School safety catapulted to the forefront of a national conversation after a May 24 mass shooting left 19 students and two teachers dead in Uvalde, Texas.

Locally, Danville police quickly credited other students alerting officials to the gun on school grounds.

“This case is an example of how members of the community can save lives and improve the safety of everyone when they ‘see something and say something’ to authorities,” police wrote in a release this week. “The Danville Police Department continues to encourage citizens to share information as we partner to reduce violent crime in our community.”

Davis also stressed the need for students, parents and the community to speak out, echoing the police department's motto of "see something, say something."

"We want all parents to be engaged in the safety of our school," she said. "We encourage parents to have conversations with their children about behavioral consequences and to be aware of what their children might have in their possession."

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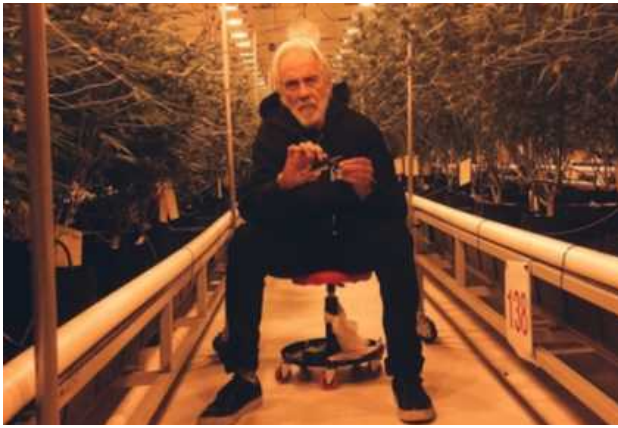
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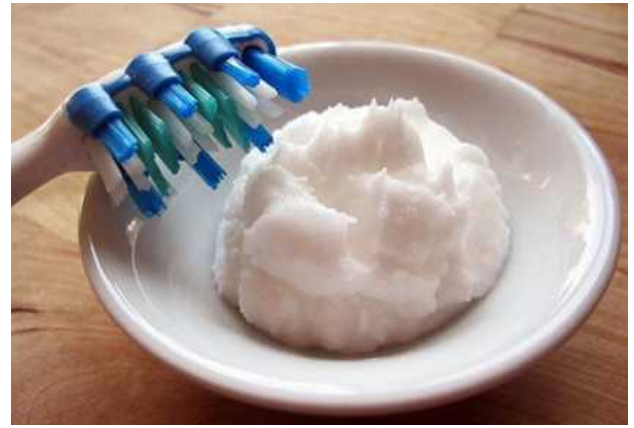
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ALERT

PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Danville School Board to tackle mask rules; Pittsylvania County letting parents decide

Charles Wilborn

Jan 26, 2022

Members of the Danville School Board are expected to take up the debate over masking Thursday in light of Gov. Glenn Youngkin's executive order allowing parents to opt out of the requirement for their children in schools.

Schools in Pittsylvania County are already in step with the governor's order that went into effect Monday. Youngkin's action is facing legal challenges and causing school systems across the commonwealth to make a decision: defy the order and keep a mask mandate in place or allow parents to decide if their students should wear the face coverings.

"This decision was made with School Board awareness," Pittsylvania County Schools Superintendent Mark Jones told the Register & Bee via email Wednesday. The Pittsylvania County School Board met before the executive order was issued on Jan. 15, the same day Youngkin took office.

The new policy started Monday in Pittsylvania County. Masks are still required on school buses, Jones said in a statement. Also, all school employees must continue to wear face coverings.

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As of Wednesday, only six students had active COVID-19 infections in Pittsylvania County Schools, an online dashboard shows. This comes after record numbers of infections prior to a snowstorm that canceled classes for nearly a week.

Danville Public Schools reported only four students with active virus infections by midday Wednesday. Schools were closed last week in the city for weather.

The city school board initially was set to meet last week, but the threat of winter weather postponed the gathering until Thursday.

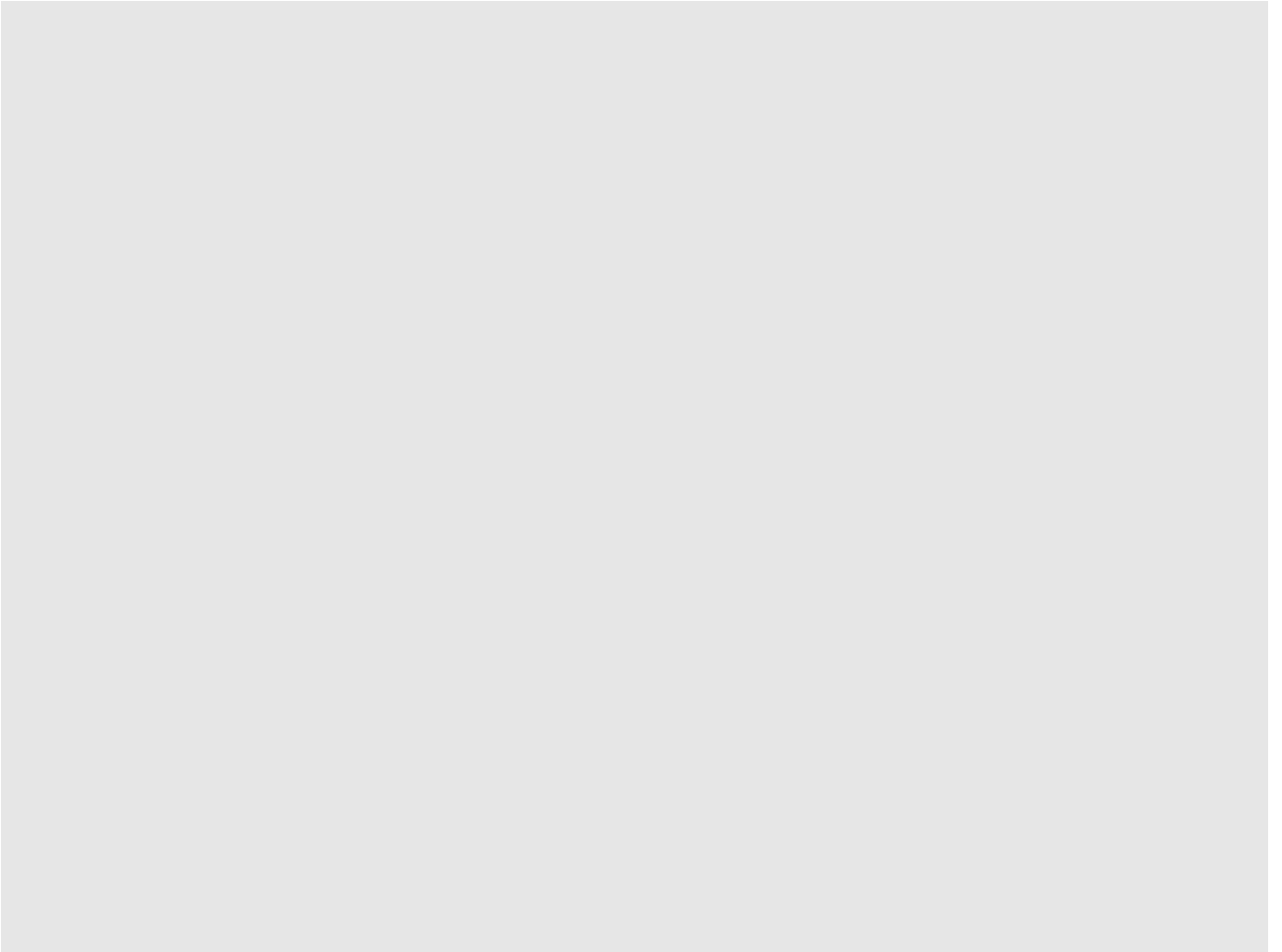
“We will be discussing our COVID-19 mitigation strategies, including masking, at tomorrow’s meeting,” Lanie Davis, a spokesperson for Danville Public Schools, confirmed Wednesday. “Those strategies have not changed this week.”

Children represent the demographic with the lowest vaccination rate in Danville and Pittsylvania County. Only 6% of those 5-11 are considered fully vaccinated, the Virginia Department of Health reports. In the 12-15 age group, 31% have received the proper doses and 35% of children 16-17 are fully vaccinated.

“Vaccination remains a critical tool to prevent and counter the pandemic,” Brookie Crawford, a spokesperson for the Virginia Department of Health, told the Register & Bee last week.

A vaccination clinic is planned from 9 to 11 a.m. Saturday at Gibson Elementary School in Danville. It’s part of a series of clinics hosted by the local health district to get more shots in more local arms.

These clinics offer first, second and booster doses. Vaccines are available to anyone 5 and older, but a parent or guardian must accompany children under 18.



Galileo Magnet High School graduate Marlenne Rodriguez makes her way through the school on May 29, 2020.

Register & Bee, file

The Pittsylvania-Danville Health District added 106 new cases of COVID-19 in Wednesday morning's update from the health department. That brings the seven-day average to about 195, which is a drop from the all-time average high of 237 daily reports on Jan. 14. Still, it's significantly higher than the 2021 surge.

The positivity rate, after slightly dropping recently, has soared again in the region. On Wednesday morning, 43% of all COVID-19 tests in Danville yielded a positive results, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Pittsylvania County's rate is 47%. The figures — coupled with overall infections — act as a gauge to state and federal health officials on the local impact on the pandemic.

Nearly every locality — with only seven out of more than 3,000 as the exception — in the United States is in the highest risk category for COVID-19 spread, according to the CDC. With transmission rates so high, the agency recommends everyone wear face masks for indoor public settings.

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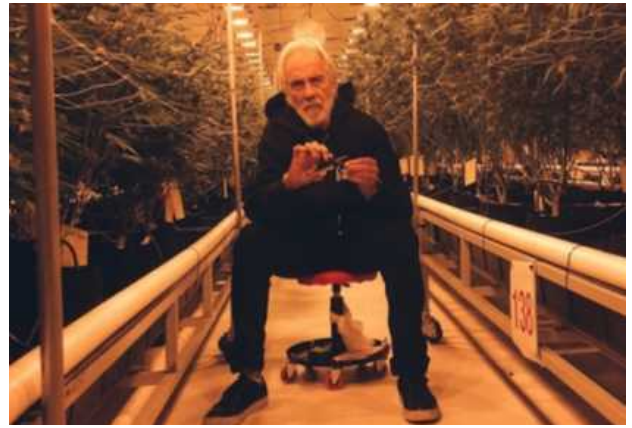
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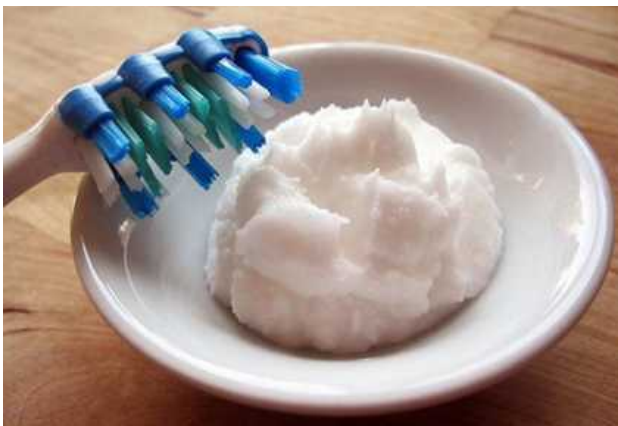
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