



KIDS COUNT USVI

2022 Political Candidates Questionnaire

As a political candidate in the upcoming 2022 U.S. Virgin Islands Election, St. Croix Foundation's [KIDS COUNT USVI](#) Team invites you to participate in a 2022 Candidate Questionnaire relative to the well-being of children and families in the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Please reflect on and answer each question by **September 26, 2022**. All responses will be housed on EngageVI.org and distributed to media and key stakeholders in our communities, including the KIDS COUNT USVI 'network' of nonprofits, public sector agencies, and national partners. This will give candidates the opportunity to share their platform and perspective with voters, and will give voters the opportunity to evaluate candidates on their engagement with these critical issues.

Please note that responses will be published as received and will not be edited in any way (e.g., for typos, misspellings, grammatical errors). Please direct any questions you may have to lcox@stxfoundation.org and a response will be forwarded promptly.

Submission Directions

1. Please complete the following questionnaire and submit your answers to Lilli Cox at lcox@stxfoundation.org by September 26, 2022, close of business.
2. If there are any technical difficulties with completing, saving, or submitting this form, please contact Lilli Cox at lcox@stxfoundation.org.

Candidate's Full Name

Angel L. Bolques Jr.

Office sought in the 2022 USVI Election

Governor

Senator - STJ-STT

Senator - STX

Senator - VI

**1. For the last school year with publicly available data (SY2018-2019), the highest retention rate among students in public school occurred in the 9th grade, with almost one-third of students (30%) being retained. (See page 25 of the [2021 KIDS COUNT USVI Data Book](#).)*

While more recent data from the VIDE indicate that there has been some improvement in retention rates, given the data, what specific policies and/or interventions would you utilize to address this critical issue?

What funding opportunities/resources are you aware of that could be used for cross-departmental initiatives?

Given that retention rates is specifically about students who for whatever reason don't earn high enough grades to be promoted, as a policymaker I'd want to look at what efforts are being made to track the performance of every student, monitoring and raising alerts that trigger providing extra supports for those who fall behind early to give them the best chance to succeed. In addition, when analyzing the Promotion and Retention Public Record data for the 2021-22 school year available on VIDE's website, it is clear that across the board, retention rates in public schools are higher among boys than girls, that St. Croix district's retention rates are over 1.5% lower than St. Thomas/St. John district for Black students, and that white students in both districts have the lowest retention rates by far of any other ethnicity. As a candidate running for the Senate, I'm looking forward to having the

opportunity to engage our educational leaders as to why these disparities in retention exist, and then focus on identifying evidence-based policies and programs that address these disparities. Given that VIDE received \$138 million dollars in federal funding through the American Rescue Plan Act because of the pandemic's impact on our students educational progress, I want to work with VIDE to ensure they are utilizing those funds to address the academic impact of lost instruction caused by the pandemic, and investing in both summer learning and afterschool programs to reduce retention rates among all demographics territory-wide.

**2. The KIDS COUNT team recognizes the inextricable link between our nonprofits/social impact organizations and children and families and is conducting interviews with local social service organizations, providing insight into the importance of and dire need for community resources in the USVI that provide sustainable safety nets, relief, and enrichment in our children's lives.*

What policies and/or amendments would you advocate for to support nonprofits that serve children and families in the areas of health, education, housing, public safety, and economic well-being?

Again the American Rescue Plan is federal funding that represents a historic investment that nonprofits need to take advantage of. In late July, Governor Bryan said the territory had spent only 80 million out of a total of 540 million dollars from ARPA. Yes we have until 2026 to spend it, but the pandemic has severely impacted the health, education, housing, public safety, and the economic well-being of so many in the territory. Just last month, diverse representatives from a host of nonprofits and government entities converged for a day-long retreat at the Baha'i Center on Building Vibrant Communities. As a candidate for elected office, my goal is to educate the community about the tremendous opportunities for individuals and organizations to better themselves so I want to sound the trumpet and let the public know that this federal funding is a generational opportunity.

**3. On a national level, KIDS COUNT data are derived from many sources, including the American Community Survey (ACS), which contains housing, economics, demographics, and social data. Unfortunately, the ACS is not conducted in the USVI. In the absence of the ACS, the territory administers (via the Eastern Caribbean Center) the Virgin Islands Community Survey (VICS), collecting data similar to that included in the population and housing components of the decennial Census. The last published VICS was released in 2018 (reflecting 2015 data), with the release of 2018 data expected in 2022. (See page 6 of the [2021 KIDS COUNT USVI Data Book](#)).*

Given the territory's challenges around data collection and the rapidly changing ecosystem our children and families live in, what do you propose to improve data collection and usage for policy decisions in the USVI?

Currently the VICS was funded from the local government at \$110,000, but further investigation suggests that is not nearly enough. Long term, what needs to happen is that the American Community Survey (ACS) should incorporate gathering data from our territory, but our lack of a standardized address system disqualifies us from inclusion. The Lt. Governor's Office has received the funding for an entity to standardize our address system in the territory; hopefully a request to bid will be issued in short order and once standardized the US Virgin Islands will be treated like Puerto Rico and other states whose data is collected by ACS annually.

**4. According to the most recent available data (2019-2020 school year), 54% of English Language Learner (ELL) public high school students did not graduate in 4 years compared to 71% of all public high school students (page 27, [2021 KIDS COUNT USVI Data Book](#)).*

How do you propose we support ELL students and address their academic, social, and emotional needs to improve their educational outcomes?

One of the recent initiatives that the Department of Education is seeking to implement is last month they put out an Request For Proposal (RFP) for an educational entity to provide training for 15 teachers from each School District to complete a master's degree in Education with a specialization in English as a Second language. By making this significant investment (\$300,000) for our teachers, the government is acknowledging that our territory is a big melting pot, with Haitians who speak French or Patois, Santo Dominicans who speak Portuguese, residents from our Latin countries who speaking Spanish, and it is in the best interest of our territory to create access for educators to develop skills that will help them reach and empower residents for whom English is not their native tongue.

**5. In 2018, 36% of surveyed public high school students “felt so sad or hopeless almost every day for 2 or more weeks in a row that they stopped doing some usual activities” (page 38, [2021 KIDS COUNT USVI Data Book](#)) - a response often associated with clinical depression.*

What do you consider to be some of the primary contributing factors to the mental health challenges facing our youth, and what are some of the systemic 'fixes' to the Territory's mental health infrastructure?

Low self-esteem, developing dysfunctional coping, problem-solving, and interpersonal skills, bullying, and the exposure to numerous risk factors including severe socio-economic living conditions, pressure to conform with peers or lack of access to quality support and services all contribute to the rise of young people enduring mental health challenges. Systemic fixes include holding our education leaders accountable for implementing conflict resolution programming and peer mediation culture in our schools. Title 17, chapter 42 of our Code has a number of policy initiatives around conflict resolution education, but ironically we've all seen recent cell phone videos of students on multiple school grounds fighting. We must make sure our teachers and school leaders have the resources they need to create a culture where every student is valued and they recognize their duty to find more excellent ways to resolve conflict.

**6. Opportunity Youth are generally defined as those young people between the ages of 16 to 24 years old who are considered “disconnected” from school and work (i.e., not in school and not participating in the labor market), according to the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Data on Opportunity Youth in the USVI are minimal and variable from year to year. Previous KIDS COUNT Data Books report that between 2005 and 2014 the percentage of teens ages 16 to 19 that were not in school and not working fluctuated from a low of 11.3% (in 2006) to a high of 27% (in 2013).*

What specific steps and strategies would you develop to reconnect this population?

The labor market in the territory has changed within the last 5 years due to Hurricanes Irma/Maria and the coronavirus pandemic. The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) was developed by the Federal government in 2014 to empower the nation's workforce including young people between the ages of 16 to 24 who are considered disconnected from school and work. However, it has yet to make necessary adjustments to its training curriculum for youth in a COVID economy. Career specialists from our local labor department must partner with the VI Chamber of Commerce, who are connected to business leaders that can provide insight to what employers generally are looking for in their employees and provide insight on how to think like hiring managers when preparing for opportunity youth for interviews. Opportunity youth need to be trained in digital

literacy as it pertains to today's job search process and the skills to navigating the employment process in a virtual world. As such, WIOA-backed employment training programs must update their curriculum to reflect current employer technology driven demands in a post-COVID world of work. With the right tools and assistance, despite barriers, opportunity youth can find and sustain meaningful employment.

Thank you for participating.