



## 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](mailto: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](mailto: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](mailto:lcox@stxfoundation.org).

#### Candidate's Full Name

Lawrence Boschulte

#### 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?**

Clearly, having a significant percentage of approximately 29% of the population with less than a 12th grade education will be devastating for the entire territory. The long-term implication of an undereducated populous for our future workforce competitiveness and economic stability will be at risk.

As numerous studies have found, students that enter school with a low readiness, tend to lag their entire educational career; therefore, one specific policy and or interventions I would employ and recommend is to address the critical issue of low learning readiness. I would establish a policy to

target and identify those categories of children that lack readiness to determine how to assist these groups. Understanding the root cause of which, and why the children are not ready would allow the territory to begin to decrease the percentage of those child that enter our public school system with low readiness in cognitive, language and pre-writing skills (33%, 48%, and 17% respectively), and better prepare the next generations of children entering the public school system.

Having inadequate revenue coming into the USVI general funds to operate the government has been a problem for many years; therefore, I do not expect the availability of additional resources to support any meaningful cross-departmental initiatives to address this issue. Given this harsh reality, I believe the USVI must consider seeking resources from external sources from federal to foundational grants to local community contributions. One means to acquire resources would be to accelerate the seeking of grants from the federal government targeted at specific retention programs. Another funding opportunity could be through the Marguerite Casey Foundation which provides general operating grants to leaders of organizations and initiatives with the potential to shift the balance of power in their communities. This foundation primarily supports locally based community organizing efforts to focus on communities of people who are consistently excluded from influencing the decisions that shape their lives and futures. This would be a perfect opportunity for identifying current or new community-based organizations that are structured to work with supporting the educational success of our youth.

For more information on how my team and I are working together to make the community a better place to live, I encourage your readers to visit my website, [www.usvilawrenceboschulte.com](http://www.usvilawrenceboschulte.com) and vote **number 7** on the ballot.

*\*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?**

I believe in collaboration and partnerships to get things done. Working singularly or at cross-purposes is never a good approach to solving the many challenges we have in the USVI. As it is clear that with shrinking resources both human and fiscal, we need an "all of territory" approach for addressing our many challenges. Nonprofits and other grassroots organizations are closest to the ground and understand the needs. Therefore, I will strongly advocate for any policies and or amendments introduced to support nonprofits, which embrace evidence-based data that can generate tangible and measurable outcomes which fully support children and families in the areas of health, education, housing, public safety, and economic well-being.

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*\*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?**

In 2017, the Department of Health held a successful data summit to bring together the myriad of departments, agencies, and local non-governmental organizations engaged in collecting data. The goal of the summit was to identify which agencies were collecting what data and how best to share the data, to eliminate duplication of data collection efforts and bring the data into one hub to execute economies of scales in data collection and management.

I highly recommend reducing the costs and efficiency of data collection and management via creating an office within the University of the Virgin Islands or elsewhere in the GVI to focus solely on centralizing and managing data. Data science and analytics is the direction to which the territory should move. While the USVI depends largely on data collected at the national level, it is critical for data to be collected locally that describes our population. Therefore, I believe it is critically important to have the capacity for the USVI to be able to convert data into high quality information to be used for decision making at all levels of government.

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*\*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?**

Of the overall student population, 28% self-identify as Hispanic and 1% other races; yet 54 percent ELLs graduate as compared to 71 percent of all public-school students graduating. While there was no data that directly linked language challenges with graduation rate; it may play a some role in ELL students leaving the school system without a diploma; therefore I would propose having more bi-lingual teachers, teacher assistants, principals, assistant principals, and or counselors within our school system with an objective of better understanding, supporting, and guiding ELL students in academic, social, and emotional areas with a goal to improve their educational outcomes.

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*\*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?**

While the U.S. Virgin Islands was not included in the National Data Book that measured mental health of children in America, the annual 2022 KIDS COUNT® Data Book focuses on youth mental health, indicating that youth rates of mental health issues increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. This finding concurs with a recent assessment by the U.S. Surgeon General which defines this increase as a youth mental health pandemic. The National Data Book also sheds light on other challenges, including those surrounding health and the economy, that are affecting American children.

I concur that youth in the USVI have similar challenges such as isolation, high rates of poverty, unemployment (doubled in the last 15 years), and a loss of hope in the future, thus, a systemic approach would be the most effective way to strengthen our mental health infrastructure.

Comprehensive behavioral health initiatives and increased funding for outreach programs to offer a positive learning environment while keeping our children safe is necessary. As a legislator, I would do three things:

- 1) lobby for funding for programs to increase the number of mental health professionals in the territory,
- 2) partner with the University of the Virgin Islands to create a curriculum-focused program that builds the next generation of local mental health professionals,
- 3) work with the Department of Health to accelerate the recruitment of qualified mental health professionals via mentorship and or on-site internships as part of the employment credentials.

Another systematic approach to improve the territory's mental health infrastructure would be a serious investment in our youth. Dell Technologies predicts that 85% of jobs that will exist in 2030 have not been invented yet therefore, we must focus on after school jobs programs to begin to address generational poverty via offering educational program for our youth that consider jobs of the future (e.g., coding, cyber). Additionally, we must prepare our youth today through leadership development programs to prepare them for means for shaping their future and instilling hope; and we must offer meaningful seven-day a week programs (sports or community service activities) that encourage consistent external engagement structured to diminish feelings of isolation.

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*\*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?**

To engage the 16- to 24-year-old population, we need to return to some of the fundamentals which makes our culture the envy of other communities. Parents should focus on trying to spend more time with their children. This means being actively involved in their children's education and knowing well their friends and associates. Be your child's biggest advocate. Cheer them on by attending after school events, sports teams, and their other extracurricular activities. Parent should encourage their children to reach for the stars and they should have a voice in their futures to teach them the importance of community activism and voting (i.e., offer a voter's registration drive at the same time as there are discussions on selective service, informational sessions offered by the Department of Motor Vehicles or with the local driving schools).

In addition to the parents being more involved with their children's lives, parents cannot do this alone. It takes a village to raise a child, therefore our community cannot stay silent. We must come together to offer opportunities for our youth to set them up to be productive and contributing members of our territory and society as a whole. Either we all will rise together, or we will all sink together; therefore, we should guide our children to join community activities early in life (know thy neighbor), for example, Friends of the National Parks.

Another strategy lies with our education system. Vocational programs in high schools in areas where we have worker shortages (i.e. electricians, plumbers, carpenters, masonry, information technology, and healthcare and mental health workers) needs to be created or expanded. Partnering with small businesses that would be willing to provide opportunities for apprenticeships for youth eligible or becoming eligible to enter the labor market can supplement this approach to make it even more successful.

The 16- to 24-year-old demographic is our future and this population is the one that will keep society running. Therefore, it is crucial to reconnect this age group as it is not just about their futures, but to all our futures. We have an aging population that will soon depend on this generation to move our territory forward.

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*Thank you for participating.*