



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

Genevieve Whitaker

Office sought in the 2022 USVI Election

Governor

Senator - STX

Senator - STJ-STT

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?

As one who firmly believes that data and strategy plans are connected to proper decision-making. To address our retention rates, I dove into action as the Chairwoman of the Committee on Education and Workforce Development to push the Virgin Islands Department of Education (VIDE) Department to address issues faced with learning loss from my first hearing in February 2021 to in July 2022 formally requesting VIDE execute a Dropout Prevention Plan pursuant the law which is codified in Title, Title 17 - Chapter 44, Sections 821-831 of the Virgin Islands Code as well as engaging the department on offering more afterschool programs and encouraging more of our students be assessed at a younger age and as they progress. I utilized my oversight powers to achieve the VIDE

moving forward with a Dropout Prevention plan, connected to my efforts to address the learning loss issue and even the data provided by the Foundation in the 2021 Kids Count Data Book. The previous Commissioner of Education, Racquel Berry Benjamin dismissed that we have a dropout problem (even as I shared content directly from the Kids Count Data Book, as even clearly on page 47 is VIDE report of the dropout of 191 children between 7th and 12th grades dropping out of school in the 2019-2022 school year) as well as addressing the Dropout Prevention Plan. In contrast, the current Commissioner Nominee Dione Wells-Hendrington and her team are steadfast in moving forward with the execution of interventions, the Dropout Prevention Plan, in collaboration with my office. In terms of the resources, VIDE, through its State Educational Agency Plan for the American Rescue Plan Outlying Areas State Educational Agencies Fund awarded by the U.S. Department of Education totaling \$138,158,430.00, which I brief the community through 2 hearings providing the plan to the public with copy that is accessible through the committee drive (See link below). This award enables VIDE to comprehensively provide intervention efforts for at-risk students, alternative learning services, including "comprehensive wrap-around and counseling services," and afterschool programs.

<https://www.legvi.org/committeemeetings/Committee%20on%20Education%20and%20Workforce%20Development/2021%20Hearings/Hearing%2012.14.21%20STX/VIDE%20Implementation%20Plan/VIDE-ARPOASEA-Implementation-Plan.pdf>

**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?

This question is very dear to me as both last year I executed my non-profit funding constituent stakeholder effort, I developed through my office in dealing with the internal bureaucracy of the Legislature (a letter has to be sent to the Chair of the Committee on Finance to be approved by the members of the Finance Committee). So last year and this year, I obtained the budgets of non-profits registered with my office, requesting their budget and project information to send to the Finance Committee. The numbers include music and art education, sports, crime prevention, leadership development, and conflict resolution. The policy I have advocated for and continue to is that as a Legislature, we come up with the entire funding amount for the non-profits, develop a system tied to community needs as the non-profits are assessed, and conduct outreach efforts for interested non-profits; in terms of legislation, the establishment of a non-profit mechanism and I have submitted legislation to establish a non-profit funding infrastructure having gone through this process and seeing the need for transparent and effective use of funding.

**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?

The challenges surrounding data collection in the territory are workforce development matters and oversight issues. First, more departments need to hire individuals for data collection and retrain current staff responsible for programming efforts within the respective department or agency to execute data collection. Specifically, as we address children and families, all the departments and agencies that make up the children and families ecosystem ensure that they employ data collectors and train current staff to collect data. We also need to in the area of oversight as I continue as a Senator to assert the need for the data collection as tied to the funding of respective departments, hence my push for performance-based budgeting throughout my tenure, I need the support of my colleagues to execute performance-based budget, and I have called upon Office of Management and Budget Director, Jenifer O'neal to continue pursuing such efforts for allocations based on departments and agencies effective use of their funds.

**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?

Senator Samuel Carrion and I sponsored Bill No. 34-0154, Act Number 8555, to specifically support our ELL student's academic, social, and emotional needs. The measure officially established the Division of Bilingual and English Language Development within the Department of Education to for them to maintain in our public schools. Additionally, my oversight in this area of support for ELL students through local and federal funding, specifically for the federally funded, American Rescue Plan grant as I indicated in the first survey question as within that funding is the specific support for ELL student's academic and socio-emotional learning that I have followed up on with the Department. This also included my education and workforce development hearing in vetting the bill as well as continued receipt of updates of support for ELL student services. The measure officially established the Division of Bilingual and English Language Development within the Department of Education for them to maintain in our public schools.

**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?

I consider some of the primary contributing factors of mental health challenges facing our youth, are poverty, school and online peer environments, both Hurricanes Irma and Maria and the COVID-19 pandemic. As reported in the Databook, a number of our Virgin Islands youth live in poverty according to the latest data, the 2015 Virgin Islands Community Service at a rate of 29.6%. The school and online peer environments as captured and presented in the Databook on page 33, the statistics surrounding youth at-risk, the level of bullying at the middle and high school levels is concerning and bullying. Bullying has a major effect on youth, that is why in early 2013, I, working on a legislative contract in collaboration with the Office of the Governor, updated our local Virgin Islands bullying code. The level of fights at school, incidents of drug use on campuses, has impacted the mental state of our youth. As reported in CBS USVI news, I held an emergency meeting concerning the state of violence in our schools and solutions that can made executed in short and long-term, in collaboration with the Department of Education, Commissioner Nominee Wells-Hendrington along with colleagues, here is the link to that article: <https://usvicbs.com/news/leaders-address-crises-at-usvis-public-schools/>

Both Hurricanes Irma and Maria whereby many of youth were pushed further into harsh economic conditions (loss of housing, further loss of resources, closure of their schools resulting in learning loss). Then the Covid-19 pandemic added to the continued impact of the disasters with further school closures, virtual learning as I engaged the Department of Education over through my continued oversight and requests for information (strategies by the Department to account and address learning loss). The level of domestic violence as widely reported through the pandemic is also impacting the youth. Here is article by the Virgin Islands Department of Health on stopping the incidents of domestic violence: <https://doh.vi.gov/news/stop-domestic-violence-our-community>

The systemic fixes to the mental health will involve the education and health stakeholders aligning and engaging in intervention efforts, more school-based programs, peer-to-peer counseling I have offered legislation to establish the Youth Court system of the Virgin Islands, which I believe is systematic approach to addressing juvenile delinquency. I have also supported legislation for mental health within our schools.

**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?

I have spent much of my professional and volunteer career engaged in strategies to address youth development and redevelopment which entails encouraged their connected to their community. The specific steps and strategies to reconnect this population is the reestablishment of our youth leadership infrastructure. I have worked throughout my term to restore the Commission on Youth, brought back in 2012 by former Senator Janette Millin Young, an entity historically responsible to curb juvenile delinquency and to develop the next generation of community and business leaders. I led the restoration of the youth senate, the Virgin Islands Youth Advisory Council that was dormant for a few legislatures until the 34th Legislature. Our youth need a platform for their voices to be heard as well as training in youth leadership as we help build their connection to their community. Additionally, other strategies involved, the development for more youth-based community programs and support for the current youth-based community organized. I continue to work with assisting our local non-profits in the receipt of resources, funding for their youth programs as I am specifically offering legislation to establish a Non-Profit Infrastructure fund aimed a proper alignment of community programs many of which are in support of youth development. With the funding and support more organizations will thrive and thereby more youth will be properly assisted to feel more apart and connected to their community.

Thank you for participating.