

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Vialet Launches 'Education First' Billboard Initiative

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Ernice Gilbert **June 03, 2015**



ST. CROIX -- Freshman Sen. Kurt Vialet has launched an education billboard initiative that seeks to make education a top priority on the island, while encouraging students to become self-motivated in their quest to succeed.

The first billboard was installed near the St. Croix Educational Complex on Tuesday, and features a student holding school books, and prominently-placed caption that reads: 'Education First, Everything Else Can Wait'.

Vialet said the initiative was created not only to promote education and the importance of staying in school, but also to dissuade students from following the "social ills that stop students from achieving an education."

The senator stated that there needs to be a stronger focus on learning territory-wide. He said while the problems associated with a lack of education have been acknowledged, more emphasis needs to be placed on the importance of learning and the benefits thereof.

"There's a segment of our community that thinks it is cool and okay not to be educated," Vialet said. "So this is our way of trying to build intrinsic motivation, where it comes from within. Where a child comes to school ready, willing and wanting to learn. Not the teacher having to discipline or having to motivate -- but they're going to come, willing and ready to learn."

The senator pointed to studies that show a direct correlation between an educated community and job opportunity. "Businesses are literally asking, 'if we come here, do you have educated individuals that can take these jobs,' so this is part of the push of trying to move St. Croix forward," the first-term senator added.

Vialet, an educator for multiple decades, said there's a direct link between students who have an innate desire to learn and success, compared to those who constantly have to be pushed.

"In my years in education, having done data analysis for the last 20 years, our top 20 students are intrinsically motivated," Vialet said. "It doesn't come from the parent alone, they have that desire inside that they want to be educated, and intrinsic motivation goes a far way."

Many students attempt to learn because of positive, outside influences like the desire to not disappoint parents; or promises of rewards. But that's not enough, Vialet said, because once that extrinsic motivation is no longer available, the desire to learn can easily wane. The senator is hoping that his latest effort will begin the process of changing the community's mindset to where education becomes a top priority.

The Consortium also spoke to Nashalis Gonzalez, the Educational Complex student featured on the billboard.

"I think the billboard initiative will affect students greatly because some of them think that just because they are regular students and they may not do as well as others, that they can't get far," said Gonzalez, who revealed that she intends to study educational psychology and counseling, while modeling part-time.

The billboard initiative is the first in a two-part effort, Vialet said, crediting his wife, Wanda Figueroa-Vialet, also an educator, for coming up with the idea. The second undertaking will utilize billboards at all the island's schools during the fall semester to promote career options beyond the often sought-after jobs. It's called 'Share Your Career Choice'.

In closing, Vialet said the initiative is about "changing the psyche." He pointed to Cuba, which has the highest literacy rate in the Caribbean, and credited that achievement to the government as well as the community's focus on education.

"They understand that you must be educated, so the literacy rate is extremely high and Cuba has more doctors per every 100,000 people than any other place in the world, which affords them to export doctors -- because they have focused on education," Vialet

said.

"So we want to reach to that point in focusing on education where teachers will be able to do their jobs and don't spend so much time trying to motivate," he concluded.

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