

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Op-Ed: Stopping The Growing Epidemic Of Poor Literacy Skills In The Virgin Islands

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In early August of this year, the Community Foundation of the Virgin Islands released to the public its 15th annual U.S.V.I. Kids Count Data Book for 2014 containing the latest statistics pertaining to important issues affecting our children and youth and some of this information was printed by the media. Of great concern are the extremely low literacy rates of our school-aged children. In my opinion, poor literacy or reading skills has become widespread in our islands and must be treated as an epidemic with all our efforts as a community garnered to cure or stop it because of all the devastating repercussions if we do not.

According the V.I. Kids Count Data Book for 2014:

More than half (53%) of our children entering public school at kindergarten lack language (words) & understanding skills of typical 5 year olds. "Literacy and language skills begin long before children start kindergarten. Infants and children who are spoken with, read to or told stories each day develop age-expected vocabulary, comprehension and cognitive development. This lack of kindergarten readiness for such a large portion of our young children is a compelling reason to improve the quality, delivery and expectations of education and care in early childhood settings."

- At the end of 3rd grade, almost half (46%) of our public school students do not read to grade level and most of the students who scored low were boys. Children are tested in 3rd grade because learning changes in 4th grade from learning to read to reading to learn. This statistic shows that almost half of our children enter 4th grade behind the expected reading proficiency. The obvious question is - do they ever catch up? The next set of statistics answer that question.
- At 5th grade, almost half (47%) of our public school students do not read to grade level.
- At 7th grade, almost three-fourths (68%) of our public school students do not read to grade level.
- By 11th grade, 64% of public school students read below grade proficiency.
- We have a high rate of school dropouts, with 2/3 being male. Since most of school dropouts occur in the transition from middle school to high school, I wondered whether the drop in the numbers of those students who read below grade level from 68% in 7th grade to 64% in 11th grade was due to the number of students who have dropped out of school. The Kids Count Data Book does not address this.

Unfortunately, these statistics repeat themselves year after year. With the literacy rates of our children and youth being shockingly low, especially among our young men, we have started to see the negative consequences. Illiteracy leads to poverty and almost one-third of our children live in poverty, according to the Kids Count Data Book. Moreover, there has been growing gang violence. As a judge in the Superior Court, I observed that most of the criminal defendants/ offenders in adult and juvenile cases were our young men, many of whom had poor literacy skills.

But, year after year, new students come into our educational system, many never reach reading proficiency for their grade level, others drop out or graduate with poor literacy skills. The result is what I believe has become an epidemic – the widespread disease of poor literacy skills. What do governments and communities do when there is a disease spreading and ravaging its people – they come together and develop plans to fight it and stop its spread as well as attempt to heal the people who have been afflicted. Considerable manpower, skills and expertise are all focused on these priorities.

The same must be done to promote and teach literacy. Our government officials and our community must understand the key role that literacy plays in keeping a child in school and doing well, graduating from high school, and ultimately having a successful career, whether through college or vocational career/technical training, as well as lowering the crime rate. Fighting illiteracy must be a priority. Much of our manpower, skills and expertise should be focused on developing plans to combat this epidemic – not just with children but also with adults. To make this effort successful, there must be a partnership between government and the people, especially parents.

Many good-hearted people and community organizations donate books to children and I was among them. However, I soon realized after volunteering to read with children and speaking with parents about the importance of reading that we need to do considerably more, as giving a book to a child who does not read well or to parents who do not understand the importance of reading is similar to giving a person who is drowning a life preserver, but not explaining how to use it and the importance of using it.

We have brilliant minds and caring hearts in our islands. Let's join together to develop a battle plan to fight the epidemic of poor literacy skills.

Submitted by:

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Feature Image: African American boy reading.

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