

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Op-Ed: As the Conditions Of Our Children And Youth Spiral Downward, When Are We Going To Truly Help Them?

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The Community Foundation of the Virgin Islands once again released to the public its 16th annual U.S.V.I. Kids Count Data Book containing the latest statistics pertaining to important issues affecting our children and youth and some of this information has already been printed by the media. Of great concern are the continuing extremely low literacy rates of our school-aged children and the growing number of children living in poverty, public high school dropouts, teen violent crime arrests, and detached youth. I have written about this before and will continue to do so to highlight our failures in improving the conditions of our children and youth here. Year after year, we read and

hear about these poor statistics but they seem to be falling on deaf ears. As a result, we see the devastating repercussions, including a high crime rate, in our community. This article is a cry for action.

According to the V.I. Kids Count Data Book:

- More than half (55%) of our children entering public school at kindergarten lack language (words) & understanding skills of typical 5 year olds. As stated in an earlier Data Book, “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 (43.3%) of our public school students do not read to grade level and most of the students who scored low were boys. Although this score is a little lower than last year, it still remains very high. Children are tested in 3rd grade because learning changes in 4th grade from “learning to read” to “reading to learn”. According to the report, “research shows that 75% of children struggling with reading in third grade remain poor readers through high school ... and are four times more likely to drop out of high school than students who are proficient.”

The report further establishes that it is critical to identify those children who are having reading difficulties at this stage and assist them so that they stay in school and acquire the necessary skills for the job market.

- We have a growing rate of public high school dropouts – 7%. That was up from 5.2% the previous year. According to the report, high school dropouts have a higher likelihood of poor health, being on welfare, and being involved with the justice system.
- We have an extremely high rate of detached youth ages 16 to 19 – 27%. “Detached youth” refer to youth who are not enrolled in school and not working. This percentage almost doubled from last year’s report and is three times higher than the U.S. rate, which is 9%!
- Teen violent crime arrests jumped to be “alarmingly high”. The rate was 559 per 100,000 teens as compared to the national rate of 168.4 per 100,000 teens. Of those who were actually incarcerated at the Youth Rehabilitation Center on St. Croix, 80% were male and 62% tested positive for drugs during the drug screens.
- The number of children in poverty grew to 35% of all V.I. children. “Poverty is the single greatest threat to children’s well-being. Children who experience poverty when young, or who experience deep and persistent poverty, are at greatest risk for poverty’s long-lasting, negative effects.” To truly understand the magnitude of the number of our children living in poverty, the U.S. child poverty rate is 22%, so we have a shockingly 12% higher number of children living in poverty.

As a judge in the Superior Court for more than 6 years, 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 and/or had dropped out of school. A judge’s role is not to create educational programs, but to punish the wrong doer for the crime committed

and/or assist with rehabilitation through requiring attendance at various programs and other efforts.

Based on all these statistics and the overwhelming research, it seems obvious that the cure for many of the ills of our children and youth is to teach them to read proficiently from an early age so that they are motivated to stay in school. As I have stated before, 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.

Promoting literacy must be a priority. Much of our manpower, skills and expertise should be focused on developing plans to foster reading proficiency – not just with children but also with adults. To make this effort successful, there must be a partnership between government, organizations, and the people, especially parents. Government, including teachers, cannot do it alone. Along with the generous donations of books made throughout our community by non-profit organizations must be the actual reading of those books.

It is my cry that we act now. The futures of our children and youth are at stake.

Submitted by: Soraya Diase Coffelt on March 8.