

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Tim Duncan Donates \$500,000 To Start Program In USVI Aimed At Helping Students From Low Income Families Succeed

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Retired NBA legend and St. Croix native Tim Duncan visited the land of his birth over the weekend to continue his benevolent mission. This time, Mr. Duncan, who worked tirelessly following the storms of 2017 to help Virgin Islanders, focused his attention solely on the territory's children, specifically those from low-income families, by providing a donation of \$500,000 through the Tim Duncan Foundation to initiate a program called "Yes! Our Kids Can" (YOKC).

A press event was held at the Claude O. Markoe Elementary School on Sunday morning to introduce the program. There, Mr. Duncan, Delegate to Congress Stacey Plaskett and representatives of the Bill Clinton Foundation -- all of whom were instrumental in the program's introduction to the USVI -- spoke of the importance of the effort. Other representatives included officials from the Office of the Governor and Department of Education Commissioner Designee Racquel Berry-Benjamin.

For Mr. Duncan, after learning of the program's success in Texas over a year ago, he wanted it to be introduced at home.

"I was blown away by it," Mr. Duncan said. He immediately told his girlfriend Vanessa Macias, with whom he shares a child, about the program. She had the same reaction and conclusion, which was, "We need to take this program and implement it in the Virgin Islands," Mr. Duncan said. "It is easy to do and it will have a great impact on the kids not only for the short-term, but for the long-term."

After sharing his desire to see the program introduced in the territory with its creators, the wheels started to turn, "And we're here now and we're very excited about it, and I know it's going to do great things for the kids of the Virgin Islands," added the basketball star. "Hopefully it spreads around and we can all learn from it and we can all be better because of it."

The program's website says its primary goal is to help every parent and every teacher create an expectation of success and prosperity in the mind of every disadvantaged child in a way that is measurable, scalable and affordable.

Lionel Sosa, founder of YOKC, said kids who are motivated tend to learn better, attend school more and make better grades -- all of which are accelerated by the program.

"That's Tim Duncan's dream for his homeland, every child's success," Mr. Sosa said. He also praised Mr. Duncan's philanthropic efforts. "He doesn't just talk the talk, he walks the walk," Mr. Sosa said.

YOKC president, John Andrade, spoke of the uphill battle of children who come from poor families. "They're told usually by 9 years old that college is not going to be in their future, that they're going to have to work to support their family and in the end, they don't break free," he said.

"We are instilling a success mindset in the life of every family that we serve so that they will become motivated to pursue college and career," Mr. Andrade said, speaking of the program. "When we say college we mean any type of post-secondary education that will help that person obtain a successful career that will provide a life for them and their family."

YOKC lessons help teachers reach students the way they want to learn today, delivering motivational songs, videos and games on classroom tablets, according to a description on the program's website. It also encourages family engagement that helps to demystify the process of college preparedness and encourages consistent family participation in the effort. "We empower parents to influence their child's success through regular messages via smart phone, including tips for discussion and positive reinforcement," it says.

According to Department of Education, an overview of the program will be provided to key stakeholders, i.e. unions and the Board of Education, in June. Thereafter it will be introduced to educators in the Fall of 2019, and piloted in Spring 2020. YOKC will be implemented territory-wide in Fall 2020.

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