Puerto Rico - The Wrong Route:

The Current Changes in the K-12 Public Education System

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The government of Puerto Rico is implementing major changes to the island’s elementary and secondary public education system. These changes will worsen an already bad situation.

Stronger public schools are an essential foundation for improving the dismal condition of the Puerto Rican economy. Like water, sewers, and roads, the public education system must be provided by the government. Resources to support the public system are limited, but ways can be found to create a system that will make parents proud to send their children to public schools. Unfortunately, the government has chosen the wrong route.

**Real Problems Demand Real Solutions**

There are real problems with Puerto Rico’s public schools, apparent in poor performance on standardized tests, a high dropout rate, and widespread abandonment of the schools by those who are able to send their children to private schools. To be sure, standardized tests are a poor measure of school’s accomplishments. Also, what appear to be poor accomplishments of the schools are to a large extent a consequence of the poverty and economic inequality that pervade Puerto Rican society. Nonetheless, there is certainly room for improvement in the schools.

Some of the changes being introduced by the government, the points below notwithstanding, do appear to have positive potential. The increase of teachers’ salaries stands out, though it is not clear that the salary changes will be implemented in a positive manner. Also, the decentralization of the school system’s administration could have favorable impacts, though the impacts will depend on the particulars of decentralization. Yet, even if these changes are well-implemented, they will be small steps toward effective change.

Beyond these potentially positive steps, the changes underway have major problems that define the route the government has taken. These major problems are that the changes:

* depend on the implementation of “choice”—charter schools and vouchers—as a principal means of improvement;
* are accompanied by a rapid closing of a large number of schools; and
* have been developed and are being implemented in a top-down manner, without meaningful engagement of teachers (and their union), parents, and community leaders.

The approach embodied in these major changes offers no real solutions to the problems of the Puerto Rican schools.

**Choice**

The problems with choice, either in the form of charter schools or vouchers, are well known from experience in the states. In general, as measured by test scores, charter schools on average do not perform better than traditional public schools. Some perform quite well, others quite poorly. Furthermore, there is no evidence that charter schools, either through example or by the force of competition, generate improvement in the traditional public schools. Similarly, voucher programs do not have a record in the states that indicates they would lead to significant improvement in school outcomes.

These choice programs, however, have a set of unequivocally negative impacts. They divert funds from traditional public schools, undermining other improvement efforts. These programs also divert attention from improvements that could take place in the traditional schools—choice becomes “the solution.” Moreover, they take no account of social circumstances outside the schools that affect what appear to be the shortcomings within the schools. (Choice can have positive impacts, but the positive impacts can be attained by creating choice programs within the public system, without the detrimental impacts of charters or vouchers.)

**School Closings**

In April 2018, the Department of Education announced that it would close 283 schools, 26% of the schools, by fall 2018. Although the decline of enrollments—both since the hurricanes and over the longer term—may justify some school closings, the closing decisions appear to have been made in a thoroughly top-down manner.

Top-down decisions of this magnitude are not only offensive to the many stakeholders in the schools, but also lead to numerous particular problems that could be avoided by a more inclusive process. For example, schools are scheduled for closure without due consideration of the transportation problems that will arise for many children. Distance from the schools is not only a transportation problem, but can also reduce parental engagement in the schools; such engagement is one important foundation for high quality schools. Also, when stakeholders and their knowledge about the particular circumstances of each school are ignored, the disruption of school closings is maximized.

**Top-Down Operations**

Top-down decisions are at the foundation of the entire set of changes taking place in the schools. These decisions have proceeded without engagement of parents, teachers, the teachers’ union, and community leaders. They have, accordingly, not taken account of either the knowledge or interests of these groups. Action without taking full advantage of available knowledge and without awareness of the interests of affected groups will often produce an incoherent and inefficient result.

Furthermore, the exclusion of these various stakeholders from the process of change undermines “buy-in.” Without being engaged in the changes, parents, teachers and others, at best, will not have a commitment to the success of the changes, and without this commitment the changes are most likely to be ineffective.

Indeed, without commitment, resistance is likely. The teachers’ union has already engaged in a strike in response to the changes. Additional resistance is likely in the months ahead.

**Alternative Solutions, Real Solutions**

There is an alternative route to improving Puerto Rico’s elementary and secondary public schools. The central feature of this alternative is that it would be based on broad inclusion, which would engage the stakeholders in the schools and encourage the discovery and implementation of real solutions. The components of this alternative route have been shown to yield positive outcomes. Real solutions to the schools’ problems will require both time and extensive examination and identification of the weaknesses that exist. There are no quick fixes.

A positive route to change will embody the following points:

* The full array of stakeholders—parents, teachers, school administrators, the teachers’ union, and community leaders—must be brought together to develop the changes in the schools.
* Similarly, in each school, multiple stakeholders should be represented on a committee that oversees that school’s progress. A strong parent teacher association (PTA), is integral to this oversight, but others should also be on each school’s committee (e.g., a union representative, a member of the schools’ administration, a community activist). Resources must be provided to support the operation of schools’ oversight committees.
* Parent engagement is especially important, and must be actively encouraged (with funds allocated for this encouragement) so that they and their children will “own” the schools.
* Teachers need leeway in implementation of curriculum. Within the framework of general curricular guidelines and goals, teachers must be supported in developing their own approaches to meeting these guideline and goals.
* Break up the top-down system that dominates the schools, including (but not limited to) a meaningful decentralization of the administration. Seven districts (the number in the government’s plan) seems a minimum. Each large city will need to have its own district, and contiguous smaller towns will need to be combined into at least three districts. It is essential that parents and other stakeholders be physically close enough to have easy access to district administrators.
* Sufficient funds on a continuing basis need to be available to support the teachers’ work, both through salary increases and general support. To a large extent, this can be accomplished without increasing the educational budget, by shifting funds to instructional activity from excessive administrative, testing, and other categories of expenditure. The most recent data (2014-15) indicate that Puerto Rico spends 41% of its school budget on instructional activity, while the figure averages 61% for the states.

The desperate situation resulting from a decade of economic decline and then the hurricanes has created an opportunity for actions tailored to the Puerto Rican situation. Similar changes to what Puerto Rico’s government proposes have been instituted at sites in the states, but they have not worked well. If they have failed in the states, where the availability of resources is much better, these changes are certainly not appropriate for Puerto Rico.

The approach suggested here focuses on creating broad engagement in the work of public education. Parents, teachers, and other stakeholders can provide the foundation for a new invigoration of Puerto Rico’s schools. The goal, of course, is to create a public education system of high quality, where students not only perform well on the traditional test-based measures, but also are equipped to become effective participants in the workforce and civic life.

The measure of success will be the rising pride that parents and communities feel in their public schools. Private, parochial, and charter schools will not carry special prestige or status. Public schools themselves will become elite schools. The pride that parents will take in sending their children to the public schools will stem the “leakage” to the private schools and reduce the school dropout rate. Such success has been achieved by many communities in the states and in some countries. (The example of Finland stands out.) Puerto Rico, too, should and can become a site known for the high quality of its public schools.