



Puerto Rico

Educational Transformation

Guidebook





Dear Governor-Elect González-Colón,

Congratulations on the election to serve as the next Governor of Puerto Rico. I wish you the greatest success and look forward to discussing the future of Puerto Rico's education system with you. The archipelago's success is deeply connected to the strength of its education system. The U.S. Department of Education (Department) stands firmly committed to improving student outcomes while including students, families, and educators at the heart of every decision. I believe strongly that to do this, the transformation of the education system must continue.

Specifically, the initial stage of transformation — the decentralization of the Puerto Rico Department of Education (PRDE) — must be a principal strategy.

This historic transformation of the PRDE will catalyze change and create a system that empowers school communities, makes better use of precious federal and island resources, increases accountability and trust, and most importantly, improves student opportunities and outcomes. The Federal commitment of unprecedented support will continue alongside the very capable leaders in Puerto Rico as this transformation continues.

As you are aware, on May 22, 2023, the Government of Puerto Rico (GPR) committed to decentralizing Puerto Rico's education system by creating the Initiative for Decentralization of Education and Autonomy of Regions (IDEAR) through the signing of [Puerto Rico Executive Order OE-2023-014](#). This led to a community-informed decentralization [plan](#) that is currently supported with American Rescue Plan funding to GPR.

Stakeholders throughout the island have long recognized the challenges that Puerto Rico's centralized education system faces in delivering a high-quality education to its students.

I continue to share those concerns and urge your incoming administration to bring much-needed stability to an already fragile school system.

This is not easy work, but it is the right work. At this moment, the educational region of Ponce is operating as a provisional local educational agency (LEA) with the goal of being Puerto Rico's first autonomous LEA by July 2025, in time for the upcoming school-year. That progress must continue for the benefit of students in the archipelago.



Many said this progress was not possible due to the challenge of changing the culture of PRDE's centralized decision making and the politicization of hiring and funding decisions that plagues the system. However, in the last three years, Puerto Rico has made significant progress toward improving the education of students by providing the first-ever increase to teacher salaries in 12 years, establishing its first local Board of Education elected by the people of the Ponce region, and committing to a long-term plan to increase outcomes for students by overhauling a centralized system. Many doubted this progress was possible. I never did.

You are the leader that will take this transformation to the next level as Governor and ensure that the work of decentralization continues throughout the island.

The Department will continue to support Puerto Rico through this transformation, recognizing that there is much work to be done. In this document, you will find concrete recommendations to ensure the decentralization's seamless transition between administrations. This was developed with the intention of communicating the efforts of decentralization, outlining transitional considerations, and establishing a roadmap for your input and consideration.

My team will be in touch in the coming weeks to set up an opportunity to discuss the recommendations.

Again, congratulations on becoming Governor-elect! I look forward to working in partnership with you to achieve the progress ahead.

Sincerely,

Miguel A. Cardona, Ed.D.
U.S. Secretary of Education



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1. Background

In a bold effort to reimagine what is possible for students, the United States Department of Education (Department) and the Government of Puerto Rico (GPR) committed in 2021 to an education system transformation. Recent data indicates that students in Puerto Rico are performing lower on most measures compared to students across the United States.¹ Furthermore, out-migration of families to the mainland was accelerated due to a low-performing educational system, resulting in a reduction of professionals such as teachers and medical doctors, constraining of the economy, and an increase of the average age of the population.² Teacher attrition has been mainly attributed to the gap in wages between educators on the island and those in the states.³

¹ The Nation's Report Card, 2022: <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/>

² Fernando Rivera, Puerto Rico's population before and after Hurricane Maria, July 2020
https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7387120/pdf/11111_2020_Article_356.pdf

³ Displaced By Maria, Puerto Rican Teachers Face Hurdles On Mainland, 2017
https://www.huffpost.com/entry/displaced-by-maria-puerto-rican-teachers-face-hurdles_b_59f9d13fe4b0b7f0915f6325



2. Vision

To accomplish the goal of providing a top-tier educational system in Puerto Rico, two principal strategies were agreed upon—decentralizing decision-making, and eliminating the political influence in education.

The first strategy empowers school communities to make decisions based on local student needs, allocate resources swiftly and effectively, support improvements in academic outcomes, and shift decision making closer to the communities that are closest to students. The second strategy decouples the political structures from the selection process for school and district leaders. Utilizing a merit-based model increases trust, prevents attrition, and ensures the best candidates are selected for the work of leadership, regardless of party-affiliation.

This transformation is undergirded by decentralizing the unitary system. In the technical language of education, this means moving from a unitary system where authority sits exclusively in the State Educational Agency (SEA) to one where decision making responsibilities are distributed between the SEA and the Local Educational Agencies (LEAs). In all but one state, there is a separated SEA-LEA model.

These changes combine for a more responsive education system to local communities, allowing them to directly access federal funds, enable a more efficient procurement system, improve the hiring and retention of teachers, and rebuild overall trust in the public education system. Building the necessary capacity to execute this strategy and realize the potential of a new educational model for the PRDE is underway. An important and upcoming milestone is for PRDE to formally designate the first autonomous LEA in Puerto Rico's history in the Ponce region for the 2025-2026 school year.



3. Context

Puerto Rico's unitary education system has faced numerous challenges. While they are well documented, some uncomfortable realities are worth articulating.

- **Centralization and Resource Inefficiency:** Puerto Rico is the 7th largest school district in the United States, and each educational region is larger than most mainland districts, making it challenging to effectively support schools.⁴ The centralized system struggles to efficiently distribute resources, slowing down decision-making and delaying materials and services to students.
- **Emergencies:** Natural disasters and the COVID-19 pandemic have deteriorated school infrastructure requiring immediate and targeted intervention. These incidents also exposed the inefficiency of a centralized system in responding acutely to local needs during emergencies. Ongoing issues with electricity, cooling, and flooding have reduced classroom time, further straining the system's ability to deliver a consistent and quality education.
- **Declining Population and Migration:** A 42% enrollment drop over 18 years has led to school closures and underutilized facilities. Migration also causes a talent drain, making it difficult to attract and retain qualified staff.
- **Budget Constraints:** Shrinking federal aid due to declining enrollment and limited local investment strains education funding. More than 35% of the education budget in Puerto Rico is dependent on federal funding compared to an average of 9% across the United States. Additionally, non-recurring emergency funds inflate and destabilize the overall education budget and reduce Puerto Rico's ability to make long-term strategic investments in educational initiatives.

⁴ National Center for Education Statistics, 2024 <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest-dashboard/state/puerto%20rico>



- **Lagging Academic Performance:** In 2022, 0% of public school students in Puerto Rico were proficient in grade 4 or grade 8 math, largely unchanged since 2011, ranking last compared to other states and Washington, D.C.⁵
- **Deployment of Federal and State Resources:** Decades of evidence suggest that the current centralized education system struggles to adequately and efficiently expend and disseminate federal and state resources to schools, creating unnecessary barriers to student learning, and lost potential for student success. This has resulted in underpaid educators using their own money to buy critically needed supplies for students.
- **Declining Trust:** Bureaucratic dysfunction, frequent leadership changes, and misaligned priorities have eroded trust as confirmed most recently during island-wide forums and surveys.

There is one thing that all education stakeholders in Puerto Rico emphatically agree on – the current education system is not working for students and needs a transformation. In 2023, through numerous channels of feedback and participation, key stakeholders called for:

- **Cultural Shift:** Transition from a highly centralized system to one that empowers local leaders and ensures they receive proper training.
- **Merit-based Hiring:** Promote merit-based systems of hiring of central-level, regional and school leaders.
- **Excellence in Education:** Develop a vision for academic excellence rooted in Puerto Rican culture while recognizing regional differences.
- **Management and Efficiency:** Strengthen operational effectiveness at the school level.
- **Autonomy in Decision-Making:** Increase citizen participation through school boards that support local governance and uphold education quality.

⁵ The Nation's Report Card:

https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/profiles/stateprofile/overview/PR?sfj=NP&chort=1&sub=MAT&sj=PR&st=MN&year=2022R3&cti=PgTab_OT



- **High Uniform Standards of Success:** Implement high standards while assessing student success to monitor student performance consistently.
- **Budget Management:** Focus on participatory budgeting at the school level with strong fiscal oversight.

4. Unprecedented Federal Investments and Support

Since United States Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona's appointment in 2021, the Department has made supporting the transformation of Puerto Rico's education system a priority. Puerto Rico has received unprecedented support from the Biden-Harris administration which includes:

- **Unlocking COVID Relief Funding** – Starting in March 2021, and continuing in June 2021, the Department, under Secretary Cardona's leadership, released more than \$5 billion in federal funds, including more than \$1 billion that had not been awarded by the previous administration. This allowed schools in Puerto Rico to lead the country in vaccination rates, reopen with a nurse in most of the 850 school buildings, hire hundreds of school psychologists, and launch an island-wide after-school program.
- **Senior Leadership** – Immediately upon taking office, Secretary Cardona appointed a Senior Advisor within the Secretary's office, to lead efforts in supporting Puerto Rico. This role is supported by all the offices within the Department and has resulted in consistent weekly meetings and dozens of visits to the island by senior leaders from the Department, surpassing any other state in the United States. This has demonstrated a commitment to problem solving with the people of Puerto Rico to ensure that they are deciding their educational future.
- **Puerto Rico Education Sustainability (PRES) Team** – In July 2021, the Department developed a cross-office effort to help Puerto Rico address its persistent fiscal and programmatic challenges. This included the establishment of the Puerto Rico Education Sustainability team (PRES) and steering committee. This internal structure was intended to better meet the needs of the PRDE by providing a suite of technical support drawn from the main offices at the Department.



- **Teacher Pay Increase** – For far too long, Puerto Rico teachers have been woefully underpaid. That has had a detrimental effect on teacher retention, teacher absenteeism, and overall student instruction quality. In July 2022, public school teachers in Puerto Rico started receiving a \$1,000 monthly salary increase that was made possible through the American Rescue Plan, their first pay raise in 12 years. This is a 30-percent increase for the average teacher in Puerto Rico and proportionally represents the largest teacher pay increase of any state or territory within the United States.
- **First Full-Service Community School (FSCS) Grantee** – Since the launch of the program 13 years ago, the Department has awarded Community School Grants in all 50 states and Washington D.C., but never in Puerto Rico. Understanding the urgent need to improve community coordination for Puerto Rico’s neediest and most vulnerable students, the Department conducted targeted outreach to potential applicants throughout the archipelago regarding the FSCS Grant. In 2023, Puerto Rico submitted two applications and Vimenti, a project of the Boys and Girls Club of Puerto Rico, received a \$10.5M award over five years.
- **Puerto Rico Department of Education (PRDE)** – Under Secretary Miguel Cardona’s leadership, the United States Department of Education has supported the PRDE through their largest education transformation ever, decentralizing their unitary school system, with the goal of ensuring that resources get directly to school communities and that decisions are made at the local level by those closest to students.



5. Decentralization Achievements to Date

Significant progress has been made in decentralizing the PRDE, with six key milestones already achieved. These accomplishments underscore both the feasibility and the benefits of continuing this work:

1. The [IDEAR 90-Day Report](#) laid the vision for decentralization and was finalized with broad community support.
2. Success in [Early Pilots](#) across the Mountain, Urban/West, and South regions demonstrated the effectiveness of decentralizing HR and procurement. The [P-Card System](#) accelerated procurement, fostering shared responsibility at the school level.
3. [Legislative regulation approval](#) formalized regional decentralization responsibilities, complying with Puerto Rico Law-85.
4. [Ponce has been prioritized](#) as the first region to convert into an autonomous LEA, and a detailed plan is being implemented to achieve a functioning and compliant [LEA by July 2025](#). This will serve as the model of decentralization implementation.
5. The [New Governance Process—School Boards](#) (CALs) and Superintendents are enhancing local decision-making, culminating in the election of the [first community-nominated Superintendent](#) in Ponce.
6. A Comprehensive [Special Education System Diagnosis](#) identified key improvements that will shape efforts and policy for Puerto Rico moving forward.

6. Necessary Actions to Separate the Unitary System.

For decentralization to succeed, particularly for the launch of Ponce to be an LEA for the next school year, outlined here are the **10 essential actions** organized into four categories that must be implemented to support the SEA and LEAs in their new functions. These actions provide the foundation for a sustainable and effective decentralized education system and must be reflected in transition plans for the PRDE to be successful.

1. Governance

- a. Reconstitute the IDEAR Executive Committee:** Reconstitute the IDEAR Executive Committee and leverage this act to solidify the continuity and momentum of transformation efforts. This committee, composed of representatives from your administration, PRDE staff, community leaders, and federal experts, will work together to guide the next phase of decentralization.
- b. Formalize Public Governance:** Formalize the new public governance structure through law or regulation to complement the new operational structure.
- c. Execute Public Governance Professional Development:** Ensure new Consejo Asesor Local (CAL) members are receiving quality governance training for their new roles and responsibilities.
- d. Nominate a Secretary of Education:** Swiftly nominate a Secretary of Education with the expertise and leadership skills to lead the PRDE through this next phase of transformation.

2. Funding

- a. Publish a transparent student funding formula:** Finalize and publish the funding formula. This will provide an equitable and transparent way to allocate educational resources based on student enrollment, promoting accountability among schools and ensuring that each student receives a relatively equal level of funding, helping mitigate disparities.
- b. Maintain adequate funding for the Ponce LEA Transition:** Ensure adequate resources are in place for the Ponce LEA to continue through its transition.

3. Capacity

- a. **Ensure access to federal funds for Ponce:** Present final plan on management of federal funds to USED.
- b. **Finalize defining autonomous functions for Ponce:** Ensure local autonomy functions in Ponce are clearly defined for budgeting, human resources, and procurement.
- c. **Monitoring and Accountability:** Present final plan on SEA-LEA transition to USED, to include monitoring, compliance, and accountability responsibilities for new system.

4. Strategic Planning

- a. **Exercise Improved Communication:** Hold a Decentralization Update Town Hall within 30 days of taking office, with a community listening tour announced at the Town Hall.





7. Timeline

Q4 2024

GPR publicly announces support to continue decentralization of education system

Announce new members of Executive Committee *

Hold Decentralization Update Town Hall; announce community listening tour *

Q1 2025

Governor nominates Puerto Rico Secretary of Education *

PRDE identifies Director of IDEAR Office

Execute Town Halls *

Q2 2025

PRDE publishes student funding formula *

PRDE finalizes autonomous operational functions for Ponce *

PRDE presents SEA-LEA transition plan, including monitoring and accountability to the USED *

PRDE presents Ponce's federal program management plan to the USED *

Formalize public governance structure through law or regulation *

GPR Maintains adequate funding for Ponce LEA Transition and secure budget for continued decentralization implementation *

Q3 2025

- PRDE officially designates Ponce as LEA

(*) Denotes essential component

8. Moving Forward

Decentralizing the PRDE represents a transformative moment in the archipelago's history. It offers an unparalleled opportunity to overcome long-standing educational challenges and reshape the future for generations to come. This is a vision for the future, one that transcends political divides and is centered on the well-being of Puerto Rican students.

The progress made so far—through strong community consensus, meaningful federal partnerships, and successful regional implementations—has set the stage for real, lasting change. There has been no other state system that has had the task of transforming a system. It must be acknowledged that three years ago, most did not think this was possible. By continuing to advance decentralization, Puerto Rico can build an education system that is more responsive, equitable, and capable of empowering local leaders to create brighter futures for all students. I urge your administration to embrace this opportunity as a primary goal during your time as Governor. Together, we can continue the important work already underway while also tailoring the process to reflect your unique priorities. The Department stands ready to offer support, resources, and guidance to ensure this transformation succeeds.



**Puerto Rico's
Education System
Transformation**

