



Congressman Pedro R. Pierluisi  
Remarks as Prepared for Delivery  
American Federation of School Administrators (AFSA)  
14<sup>th</sup> Triennial Constitutional Convention  
Education and Equality: Putting a Spotlight on Puerto Rico  
New Orleans, Louisiana  
*July 26, 2015*

Good morning. *Buenos dias.*

I am honored to be here with you at the AFSA convention. I want to thank Domingo Madera, my friend and fellow Puerto Rican, and a vice president of AFSA's executive board, for extending the invitation to speak. As a graduate of Tulane University, I am happy to be back in New Orleans, one of this country's great cities.

My remarks will be about the public education system in Puerto Rico, but I want to begin by placing this subject in broader context.

I am an optimist about Puerto Rico's future. The island is blessed with natural beauty, a rich history, a vibrant culture, a sophisticated and diverse private sector, and talented and hard-working students and professionals. But my optimism is tempered by realism. To change the world for the better, you must first see the world as it is. And the reality is that Puerto Rico's potential is being squandered.

Puerto Rico, which is home to about 3.5 million people, is one of five U.S. territories. In 1898, Puerto Rico was acquired by the United States from Spain. In 1917, Congress enacted a law that granted American citizenship to individuals born in Puerto Rico. Congress has nearly absolute power over Puerto Rico and has delegated to Puerto Rico about the same authority over local matters—like education—that the states possess.

Puerto Rico is an integral part of the American family, but not a full and equal member. My constituents cannot vote for president, do not have U.S. senators, and—while I represent them in the U.S. House—my voting powers are limited. Puerto Rico lacks the most fundamental feature of American life: democracy.

Moreover, federal law applies in Puerto Rico, but the territory is treated worse than the states under key programs funded by the federal government, including certain education programs. As a result, the economic and social situation on the island is extremely difficult. Every year, 50,000 of my constituents relocate to the states in search of better economic and educational opportunities. As American citizens, they can move to Florida or Ohio as easily as someone from Louisiana can move to neighboring Texas.

Within Puerto Rico, there is a debate about whether the territory should seek to become a state, strive to become a sovereign nation, or choose to remain more or less as it is. In 2012, the government of Puerto Rico organized a referendum in which voters expressed opposition to remaining a territory and expressed a preference for statehood. The federal government responded by enacting legislation to enable Puerto Rico to hold the first federally-sponsored vote

in history, so we can resolve this issue. I expect that this vote will occur in 2017, that voters will reaffirm their desire for statehood, and that Puerto Rico will petition Congress to enact a law admitting Puerto Rico into the Union. I am looking forward to that day, because it is well past time for the people of Puerto Rico to become first-class citizens of the nation to which they have contributed so much. But for now, Puerto Rico remains a territory without full political and civil rights.

Events that take place in Puerto Rico generally receive less attention from national media outlets, federal officials and the American public than events that occur in the 50 states. In recent weeks, however, that has begun to change. Last month, the governor of Puerto Rico claimed that Puerto Rico cannot pay all of its debts. Since then, Puerto Rico has become front page news. Not all of the coverage has been accurate, but—at the very least—a spotlight is finally being shined on the territory. In this sense, the crisis presents an opportunity to be seized: an opportunity for the American people to learn more about Puerto Rico and an opportunity to make the structural changes, at both the federal and local level, that are necessary for the island to prosper.

With this as backdrop, let me turn to Puerto Rico's educational system. On the one hand, the defects of the educational system reflect the structural problems on the island. On the other hand, revitalizing our educational system so that it fulfills its mission of empowering students to become productive members of society is essential if we are to overcome those problems. Put simply: our system of public education is a source of our problems, a symptom of our problems, and one of the cures to our problems.

At present, Puerto Rico’s public education system—one of the largest in the nation—is overly centralized, difficult to manage, and ineffective in key respects. There are close to 1,400 public schools that serve over 400,000 students, which represents roughly 70 percent of the island’s school-aged population. The other 30 percent attend private schools, many of which are good and some of which are excellent. The number of public school students in Puerto Rico—400,000—is 100,000 less than it was five years ago. According to one recent study, if migration trends continue at their current pace, there will be only 300,000 public school students in Puerto Rico by 2020. If this prediction is realized, there will have been a shocking 40 percent drop in the public school student population in one decade.

The public school system is administered by the Puerto Rico Department of Education, which is the island’s largest employer—employing about 60,000 individuals, including about 30,000 teachers. The Department has an annual budget of \$3.4 billion, composed of \$2.2 billion in territory funding and \$1.2 billion in federal funding. Thus, the federal government provides about 35 cents of every dollar spent on public education in Puerto Rico. That is far higher than the average in the states, where the figure is closer to 10 cents on the dollar. In terms of funding per student, the best figure we have is from 2011, which found that per capita spending per pupil was about \$7,400 in Puerto Rico, compared to over \$10,000 in the states.

Notably, the Department functions as both the State Education Agency, known as the SEA, and the island’s only Local Education Agency, known as an LEA. This means that the public school system in Puerto Rico lacks sufficient quality control and sufficient flexibility relative to the states, since in nearly every state the SEA plays an oversight role with respect to LEAs, while—

at the same time—LEAs enjoy significant autonomy to innovate and adjust their approaches to teaching and learning based on local circumstances. The Puerto Rico Department of Education has an organic law, enacted in 1999, that is supposed to provide individual schools with a certain level of autonomy when it comes to curriculum development and administrative matters, but this law has not been implemented by various administrations in San Juan, including the current administration. The law also envisions the establishment of parent-teacher associations at individual schools, but—again—these PTAs are virtually non-existent. This is a common problem in Puerto Rico; we have good laws that are being implemented poorly or not at all.

Sadly, but not surprisingly, Puerto Rico’s public school system has yielded consistently poor results for decades, whether the metric is academic achievement, graduation rates, standardized test scores, teacher training and resources, or quality of infrastructure. We are failing our boys and girls and we are failing educators who have dedicated their professional lives to transforming those boys and girls into responsible men and women.

For example, the high school graduation rate in Puerto Rico is about 66 percent, compared to about 75 percent in the states. Nearly 20 percent of island residents over age 25 years have completed ninth grade or less, which means they are not prepared to succeed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century economy.

Moreover, the academic performance by those students who remain in the system is poor. For example, nearly 90 percent of fourth graders and 95 percent of eighth graders had less than basic proficiency in mathematics, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress exam,

which is well below the average score among students from similar economic backgrounds in the states. In addition, according to the results of the 2013 and 2014 Puerto Rico Academic Achievement Tests, which are specific to Puerto Rico, only 45 percent of students achieved proficiency in Spanish, only 41 percent achieved proficiency in English, only 30 percent achieved proficiency in math, and only 46 percent achieved proficiency in science. While I have some questions about the reliability of these tests, they nonetheless paint a worrisome picture.

There are many deeply-entrenched societal factors that contribute to these results, but also some institutional factors. For instance, 80 percent of fourth-graders and 90 percent of eighth-graders in Puerto Rico are instructed by teachers who report lacking the necessary materials and resources. By comparison, only 28 percent of their peers in the states are instructed by teachers who report lacking these essential resources. Skilled teachers can overcome a lack of resources, but we must strive to give our educators the tools they need to do their jobs.

The pressures that public school teachers and administrators in Puerto Rico confront are compounded by inadequate training, limited professional development opportunities, and considerably lower salaries than their stateside counterparts. Average salaries for public school teachers in Puerto Rico range from \$21,000 to \$33,000, while the salaries for their stateside counterparts range from \$56,000 to \$58,000. It is probable that a similar gap exists between salaries for school administrators. Given the better pay that an educator can earn in the states, as well as the high demand for well-qualified bilingual teachers and administrators that exists in the states, it is no surprise that many of Puerto Rico's most talented and ambitious educators have been relocating to the mainland.

The reality is that Puerto Rico's educational system requires radical reform, because the *status quo* is not working. Puerto Rico's students are talented, able to compete with anyone in the world in STEM and other fields. But too many students do not graduate at all or graduate without the requisite skills. For those who do make it, too many succeed in spite of the system rather than because of it. Likewise, Puerto Rico's teachers and administrators are deeply invested in their students' lives, but their enormous potential is not being fulfilled, because of the defects of the system in which they operate.

When it comes to helping young people succeed, we should follow a two-pronged approach. First, we must address societal factors like poverty, crime and the lack of family and community support and stability. These problems are not unique to Puerto Rico, but they are particularly pronounced in Puerto Rico because of the unequal treatment the territory receives under federal social safety net programs like Medicaid, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, and food nutrition assistance. The result is that too many students show up for school with too much on their mind other than learning.

Second, we must take a good, hard look at Puerto Rico's education system to see which aspects are working and which are failing. Then we should move swiftly to enhance the former and eradicate the latter. We need to be willing to take tough and even painful measures to strengthen the system, so that it is empowering students and educators rather than leaving them disillusioned and cynical.

I have many specific ideas about how to improve the quality of Puerto Rico's public schools, but let me cite just one before I end my remarks—and that is promoting bilingual education. In Puerto Rico, Spanish and English are both official languages. While many people are proficient in English, Spanish is the predominant language spoken in our homes, our local government, and our public schools. I can tell you that my ability to speak both Spanish and English has changed my life. On a professional level, it has opened doors of opportunity for me that would otherwise have remained sealed shut. On a personal level, knowing two languages has enlarged my perspective on the world. English is spoken in over 100 countries, is the language of global commerce, and has become the world's *lingua franca*—that is, the most common means of communication for speakers of different first languages. So learning it is critically important. Too many students in Puerto Rico are graduating high school without a good grasp of English, and this limits their professional opportunities and personal growth. Our public school system must make English-language instruction a priority, as a supplement to—and not a replacement of—Spanish-language instruction.

I will end here. Thank you again for the kind invitation. And thank you for all that you do, every day, to educate our children.