

# Desmantelando la Educación Pública en Puerto Rico – Dismantling Public Education in Puerto Rico<sup>1</sup>

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## Nota Introductoria

La educación pública, así como el derecho social y humano de acceso a una educación de calidad, suelen estar entre las primeras víctimas del asedio característico del capitalismo del desastre, la economía de la deuda, y las medidas de “ajuste estructural” o austeridad que suelen imponerse como “soluciones” fiscales en estos modelos. Este trabajo describe el desmantelamiento, intensificado tras el paso del huracán María en 2017, de los dos sistemas de educación pública en Puerto Rico, tanto universitaria como K-12. Fue publicado originalmente en la antología *Aftershocks of Disaster: Puerto Rico Before and After the Storm*. Yarimar Bonilla and Marisol LeBrón, Eds. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2019.

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Hurricane Maria hit Puerto Rico’s public education system hard. The island’s K–12 schools suffered \$142 million in damages, and the campuses of the University of Puerto Rico (UPR), \$133 million.<sup>4</sup> Shortly after the storm, students, teachers, family members, and administrators who could drive rushed to help clear away the debris from fallen ceilings and broken windows, and rescue libraries and equipment from water damage. Maria’s effects, however, went beyond this immediate material impact. The storm also provided a convenient excuse for accelerating and intensifying the process of shrinking and weakening the public sector in ways that benefit private and corporate interests, a process that had started well before the storm appeared in weather forecasts and news reports.

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1 Some of the content of this chapter has previously appeared in the *Nation* and *80 Grados*. It has been published as Rima Brusi and Isar Godreau. Dismantling Public Education in Puerto Rico. In *Aftershocks of Disaster: Puerto Rico Before and After the Storm*. Yarimar Bonilla and Marisol LeBrón, Eds. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2019.

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4 Kyra Gurney, “Kids Are Back in School in Puerto Rico. But Hurricane Maria’s Effects Still Linger,” *Miami Herald*, August 14 2018, [https://www.tampabay.com/news/education/Kids-are-back-in-school-in-Puerto-Rico-But-Hurricane-Maria-s-effects-still-linger\\_170882206](https://www.tampabay.com/news/education/Kids-are-back-in-school-in-Puerto-Rico-But-Hurricane-Maria-s-effects-still-linger_170882206); Claire Cleveland, “Without Researchers or Funds, Puerto Rico Universities Grapple with Future after Hurricane Maria,” *Cronkite News*, May 4, 2018, <https://cronkitenews.azpbs.org/2018/05/04/puerto-rico-universities-grapple-with-future-after-hurricane-maria/>.

Three years before the hurricane, in 2015, Puerto Rico caught the attention of the *New York Times* and other media outlets when then governor Alejandro García Padilla publicly declared the island's \$72 billion bond debt “unpayable” and announced that his government would seek “significant concessions” from debt holders.<sup>5</sup> Shortly thereafter, a report analyzing the crisis was commissioned by the Ad Hoc Group of Puerto Rico's General Obligation Bondholders—composed mostly of hedge funds that had purchased high-risk, high-interest debt on the cheap and that had lobbied heavily against any form of bankruptcy or relief for the territory.<sup>6</sup> The report highlighted a series of recommendations for Puerto Rico's government that were explicitly built on two assumptions: (1) that Puerto Rico's financial woes are “fixable” because they stem not from a “debt problem” proper but from financial mismanagement, and (2) that the governor's proposal to extract concessions from debtors posed significant legal and financial risks, and that therefore Puerto Rico needed to focus on fully paying its debt. The report, authored by three people with ties to the International Monetary Fund and provocatively entitled *For Puerto Rico, There Is a Better Way*, includes four recommendations for “fiscal reform measures,” two of which target the public education system. One proposal called for reducing the number of teachers in the K–12 system, the other for significantly reducing funding for the University of Puerto Rico (from here on UPR), which the authors refer to as a “subsidy.”

The following year, two major events dramatically shaped Puerto Rico's political and fiscal situation: García Padilla lost the general election to pro-statehood candidate Ricardo Roselló, who ran on a platform that included a promise to pay bondholders, and the US Congress passed the PROMESA Law, which established a Fiscal Oversight and Management Board, a non-elected body of seven members locally referred to as la Junta.<sup>7</sup> La Junta has nearly absolute powers over Puerto Rico's finances and can overturn local laws that may interfere with the implementation of fiscal austerity measures. Soon after their first official meeting in Wall Street, Junta members targeted both the public K–12 and higher education systems of Puerto Rico in ways that closely followed the bondholders' “recommendations” in the *Better Way* report. Correspondingly, Governor Roselló formally announced that the school closures already underway from previous administrations were going to intensify, with almost half the island's schools now targeted for closing. Following suit, the Fiscal Oversight Board (FOB) demanded that the university cut about a third of its overall budget.<sup>8</sup> And so, at the start of 2017, before Hurricane Maria made landfall on the southeastern town of Yabucoa on September 20, Puerto Rico's public K–12 schools and eleven university campuses were already facing an uncertain future. By the time the hurricane dealt a dev-

5 Michael Corkery and Mary Williams Walsh, “Puerto Rico's Governor Says Island's Debts Are ‘Not Payable,’” *New York Times*, June 28, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/29/business/dealbook/puerto-ricos-governor-says-islands-debts-are-not-payable.html>.

6 Sheeraz Raza, “For Puerto Rico, There Is a Better Way,” *ValueWalk*, July 27, 2015, <https://www.valuewalk.com/2015/07/for-puerto-rico-there-is-a-better-way/>.

7 Joanisabel González, “Ricardo Roselló buscará pagar la deuda del País,” *El Nuevo Día*, August 14, 2016, <https://www.elnuevodia.com/negocios/economia/nota/ricardorossellobuscarapagarladeudadelpais-2230317/>; Susan Cornwell and Nick Brown, “Puerto Rico Oversight Board Appointed,” Reuters, August 31, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-puertorico-debt-board-idUSKCN11628X>.

8 Rima Brusi, Yarimar Bonilla, and Isar Godreau, “When Disaster Capitalism Comes for the University of Puerto Rico,” *Nation*, September 20, 2018, <https://www.thenation.com/article/when-disaster-capitalism-comes-for-the-university-of-puerto-rico/>.

astating blow to the island's public education infrastructure, the system was already under siege from economic policies that disinvested in infrastructure, equipment, and teaching personnel. After the hurricane, disaster relief efforts did not slow down this process; rather, they accelerated the dismantling of Puerto Rico's schools and public university.

### **“Reforming” K–12: *La reforma educativa***

The process of progressively defunding public education before and after the storm required highly paid technocrats and bureaucrats committed to implementing the “difficult” decisions recommended by la Junta and by PROMESA stakeholders. Rosselló had tapped Julia Keleher for the position of secretary of education in late 2016. In the four years leading up to her appointment, Keleher's education consultancy firm, Keleher and Associates, had been awarded almost \$1 million in contracts to “design and implement education reform initiatives” in Puerto Rico.<sup>9</sup> The results of those efforts were never described to the public, but her salary as secretary, double the size of her predecessors', was justified according to her “world-class skills” and credentials.<sup>10</sup>

After becoming secretary, and especially after the hurricane, Keleher and her department not only accelerated the pace of school closures, citing hurricane-triggered migration, but also, with the assistance of US Education Secretary Betsy DeVos's office, produced an education-reform bill explicitly designed to increase “school choice” through charter schools and school-voucher programs.<sup>11</sup> Critics and activists quickly voiced their opposition. In the Senate hearings leading up to the bill's approval, UPR's dean of education testified against the widespread adoption of charter schools using research-based arguments. He was removed from his post shortly after.<sup>12</sup> The bill was signed into law by Roselló a few months after Hurricane Maria, in March 2018.<sup>13</sup> Tellingly, a separate law enacted around the same time allows for the fast-tracking of so-called church schools, celebrated by their advocates as a way to bring together “religious freedom” and “school choice.”<sup>14</sup> One of these schools, formerly named after one of Puerto Rico's national poets, Julia de Burgos, was rented by the government to an evangelical church for \$1 a month.<sup>15</sup> The church turned it into a private school, renamed it Fountain Christian Bilingual School, and, as part of the building's remodeling painted over and effectively destroyed a 1966 mural by the renowned Puerto Rican artist José Torres Martín.

The entire incident—privatizing a public school, changing its name from a Puerto Rican poet's to a religious name in English, and painting over a valuable artwork—is an

9 Kelia López Alicea, “A Defense for Keleher's Contract,” *El Nuevo Día*, February 15, 2017, <https://www.elnuevodia.com/english/english/nota/adefenseforkeleherscontract-2291546/>.

10 *Metro Puerto Rico*, “Roselló afirma que Julia Keleher es una profesional de calibre ‘global,’” March 8, 2018, <https://www.metro.pr/pr/noticias/2018/03/08/rossello-afirma-julia-keleher-una-profesional-calibre-global.html>.

11 Ley de Reforma Educativa de Puerto Rico, PR.gov, March 29, 2018, <http://www2.pr.gov/ogp/BVirtual/LeyesOrganicas/pdf/85-2018.pdf>.

12 Laura M. Quintero, “Sacan al decano de la Facultad de Educación,” *El Vocero*, October 3, 2018, [https://www.elvocero.com/educacion/sacan-al-decano-de-la-facultad-de-educacion/article\\_988c10f8-2405-11e8-a9b9-a3a33b30498a.html](https://www.elvocero.com/educacion/sacan-al-decano-de-la-facultad-de-educacion/article_988c10f8-2405-11e8-a9b9-a3a33b30498a.html).

13 Daniel Rivera Vargas, “Roselló convierte en ley la reforma educativa,” *Primera Hora*, March 29, 2018, <https://www.primerahora.com/noticias/gobierno-politica/nota/rosselloconvierteenleylareformaeducativa-1275122/>.

14 Índice, “Firma ley que exime Iglesias Escuela de regulación estatal,” June 7, 2017, <http://www.indicepr.com/noticias/2017/06/07/news/70913/firma-ley-que-exime-iglesias-escuela-de-regulacion-estatal/>.

15 *NotiCel*, “Nueva escuela de Font ‘destruye’ obra de arte,” April 12, 2018, <https://www.noticel.com/ahora/educacion/nueva-escuela-de-font-borra-obra-de-arte/728692114>.

apt metaphor for the transformation of the system and evidence of Keleher's self-admitted cultural incompetence.<sup>16</sup> In fact, in a move reminiscent of the actions of unelected colonial governments of the early twentieth century (e.g. replacing Spanish with English as the language of instruction and punishing displays of the Puerto Rican flag on school grounds,) the secretary also eliminated Puerto Rican Week from the department's official curriculum.<sup>17</sup> She also recruited candidates for high-level leadership positions from the fifty states instead of the island.<sup>18</sup>

Government officials refer to the new law as *la reforma educativa* (education reform.) The name is fitting; when in the 1990s, Rosselló's father, Pedro Roselló, was governor, he privatized the public health system, and both the new health system and the law that created it were called *la reforma de salud* (health reform). It is hard not to read today's education law, which consists mainly of eliminating public schools and creating charter schools and voucher systems, as anything other than another large-scale privatization of the education system. The final bill is, moreover, frustratingly vague on some key issues: charters may or may not be for-profit, vouchers may or may not be used at religious schools, and charters and private schools may or may not accept special-education students.

This last point, about students with special needs, is crucial. Unlike in the fifty states, where about 13 percent of the student body qualifies for special-education services, in Puerto Rico 40 percent of the student population requires them.<sup>19</sup> But research suggests that charter schools are less likely than traditional public schools to enroll and retain students with disabilities.<sup>20</sup>

According to Keleher and other government officials, the school closures are justified because the student population was greatly reduced after the hurricane and because the closed schools were not teaching their students effectively. Yet the number of students had not dropped significantly at some of the schools that were closed, and, as critics argue, closing neighborhood schools can become a cause rather than a result of migration, since many families live below the poverty line and lack adequate transportation.<sup>21</sup> Some closed schools, moreover, were actually considered "excellent" by the department itself, and some of the schools receiving new students as a result of the closings lack the necessary facilities to accommodate an increased student population.<sup>22</sup> This led to the use of containers

16 *NotiCel*, "Keleher discute con maestros durante taller de capacitación," March 9, 2018, <https://www.noticel.com/ahora/educacion/keleher-discute-con-maestros-durante-taller-de-capacitacin/713826409>.

17 Félix Cruz, "Keleher elimina la Semana de la Puertorriqueñidad," *El Post Antillano*, August 2, 2017, <http://elpostantillano.net/cultura/19903-2017-08-02-17-08-12.html>.

18 There is much scholarship on this topic. See, for example, Jorge R. Schmidt, *The Politics of English in Puerto Rico's Public Schools* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2014).

19 National Center for Education Statistics, "Children and Youth with Disabilities," April 2018, [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator\\_cgg.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cgg.asp); Agencia EFE, "Se cuadruplican estudiantes de educación especial en Puerto Rico en 10 años," *Primera Hora*, December 15, 2015, <https://www.primerahora.com/noticias/mundo/nota/secuadruplicanestudiantesdeeducacionespecialenpuertoricoen10anos-1126676/>.

20 Mary Bailey Estes, "Choice for All? Charter Schools and Students with Special Needs," *Journal of Special Education* 37 (2004): 257-67.

21 *teleSur*, "¿Por que el Gobierno de Puerto Rico cerrará 300 escuelas?," February 16, 2018, <https://www.telesurtv.net/news/cierran-escuelas-puerto-rico-20180216-0040.html>; Nydia Bauza, "Fuerte oposición a la clausura de escuelas," *Primera Hora*, April 8, 2018, <https://www.primerahora.com/noticias/gobierno-politica/nota/fuerteoposicionalclausuraedeescuelas-1276720/>.

22 Laura M. Quintero, "En lista de cierre 56 escuelas de excelencia," *El Vocero*, April 14, 2018; *El Nuevo Día*, "Educación comienza a instalar vagones en los que se darán clases en las escuelas," August 8, 2018, <https://www.elnuevodia.com/noticias/locales/nota/educacioncomienzaainstalarvagonesenlosquesedaraclasesenlasescuelas-2440195/>.

(provided by a private contractor paid with FEMA hurricane relief funds) to house students, which effectively excludes some students with disabilities who require special accommodations, and the implementation of shortened or “interlocking” schedules that shorten students’ academic activities.

### **Higher Ed “Rightsizing”: *Reforma universitaria***

A similar turn of events unfolded with public higher education. Before Hurricane Maria dealt a blow to its infrastructure in 2017, the UPR system was already facing the draconian budget cuts imposed by la Junta. Members of la Junta were making public declarations about the need for huge cuts to the public university’s budget as early as January 2017. The actual numbers were a moving target: first \$350 million, then \$450 million, then \$500 million.<sup>23</sup> The rationale for each calculation was never made public, but the cuts represented about a third of the system’s total budget. After more than a year of ignoring feedback and alternative fiscal plans drafted by the university leadership as well as student and faculty groups, la Junta imposed its own plan in April 2018, which immediately doubled tuition, with increases of up to 175 percent soon to come.<sup>24</sup> The plan also unveiled a euphemistically described “campus consolidation” that will likely close or shrink seven campuses and dramatically reduce the student body, faculty, and staff.<sup>25</sup> Ironically, Puerto Rico’s government is forced, by law, to cover the Junta’s expenses, which amounted to \$31 million in just the first ten months and are projected to reach well over \$300 million over five years.<sup>26</sup>

After the hurricane, rather than rushing to repair and strengthen this crucial asset for Puerto Rico’s socioeconomic development, the federal and local governments seemed intent on further damaging the island’s public university system. In a territory with soaring poverty and unemployment rates, the Junta has not only doubled tuition but also eliminated the waivers traditionally offered to athletes, choir members, and other students providing services to the university—all at an institution that for over a century has been the island’s main channel for upward mobility.<sup>27</sup>

The size, scope, and pace of the budget cuts demanded by the Junta increased after the hurricane and were euphemistically presented as a “rightsizing” of nearly \$550 million over the next five years.<sup>28</sup> The federal government did little to mitigate the difficult situation produced by the combined effect of the hurricane and the augmented austerity measures advocated by the Junta. In the weeks after Hurricane Maria, the US Department of Educa-

23 Juan Giusti Cordero, “El misterio de los \$450+ millones y la UPR,” *80 Grados*, June 23, 2017, <https://www.80grados.net/el-misterio-de-los-450-millones-y-la-upr/>.

24 *Sin Comillas*, “Profesores del RUM presentan un Plan Fiscal sostenible para la UPR,” March 5, 2018, <http://sincomillas.com/profesores-del-rum-presentan-un-plan-fiscal-sostenible-para-la-upr/>; Kelia López Alica, “Fiscal Blow to the UPR,” *El Nuevo Día*, April 25, 2018, <https://www.elnuevodia.com/english/english/nota/fiscalblowtotheupr-2417518/>.

25 University of Puerto Rico, “New Fiscal Plan for University of Puerto Rico,” October 21, 2018, <http://www.upr.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Fiscal-Plan-21-oct-2018-.pdf>.

26 Univision, “Junta de Supervision Fiscal gastó casi 31 millones de dólares en 10 meses,” August 1, 2017, <https://www.univision.com/puerto-rico/wlii/noticias/junta-de-control-fiscal/junta-de-supervision-fiscal-gasto-casi-31-millones-de-dolares-en-10-meses>; Jose A. Delgado, “Junta Control Fiscal costará cientos de millones de dólares,” *El Nuevo Día*, June 4, 2016, <https://www.elnuevodia.com/noticias/politica/nota/juntacontrolfiscalcostaracientosdemillonesdedolares-2206623/>.

27 Walter Díaz, 2010. “Universidad y Capital Humano: Clase Social y Logro Educativo en Puerto Rico.” Cuaderno de Trabajo Carvajal #2. Centro Universitario para el Acceso, University of Puerto Rico at Mayagüez, April 2010.

28 Keria López Alica, “La Junta recorta 10% de los gastos de la UPR,” *El Nuevo Día*, April 25, 2018, <https://www.elnuevodia.com/noticias/locales/nota/lajuntarecorta10delosgastosdelaupr-2417425/>.

tion made \$41 million available to support students at colleges and universities impacted by the hurricane, of which the UPR system received only 20 percent.<sup>29</sup> For comparison, in 2005 institutions in Louisiana and Mississippi were able to access \$190 million after Hurricane Katrina. Advocates criticized the design of the application process and its forms, which made it onerous, even impossible, for UPR campuses to apply for most funding in the midst of power outages and rebuilding efforts.<sup>30</sup> Adding insult to injury, a considerable portion of the Maria relief funds were awarded to institutions that had not been directly affected by the storm, including private ones like New York University and even some for-profit ones like Grand Canyon University, to host a relatively small number of students who came from Puerto Rico and other territories or states affected by hurricanes Irma or Maria.

In addition to making few funds available to rebuild UPR, the federal government has also gutted essential aid programs, like work-study grants, with little explanation. In Puerto Rico, where the median annual household income is below \$20,000, these policies are particularly damaging for low-income students who will likely have to drop courses in order to work part-time and secure a livable income.<sup>31</sup>

The Junta has offered no rationale for why, from the very beginning, it targeted UPR with such drastic cuts. It is an odd decision considering that the UPR is one of the strongest contributors to upward mobility and the local economy, and one of the public entities that has historically best managed its own debt.<sup>32</sup> Such a relentless handicapping of the public university's function and mission would seem to make little economic sense for Puerto Rico at this historical juncture. For example, one would expect the government to facilitate and encourage research initiatives in all areas after Hurricane Maria, from the creation of new solar technologies to the treatment of social trauma. The UPR is a crucial center for research, generating over 70 percent of the scientific research output on the island.<sup>33</sup> Despite carrying heavy teaching loads with few of the resources that faculty in the continental United States often take for granted, UPR has a world-class faculty that includes award-winning humanists and scientists, and has been an important site of scientific innovation and critical thinking. While many universities in the states struggle to increase the number of STEM degrees they produce, particularly among Latinx students, the UPR is one of the top schools in the country graduating STEM students at the baccalaureate and graduate levels.<sup>34</sup> The UPR owns and runs public hospitals, museums, theaters, and public libraries. It prepares

29 Erica L. Green and Emily Cochrane, "In Devastated Puerto Rico, Universities Get Just a Fraction of Storm Aid," *New York Times*, May 1, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/01/us/politics/hurricane-maria-puerto-rico-emergency-aid.html>.

30 Rafael Medina, "Release: CAP Submits Comments Denouncing DeVos for Ripping Off Puerto Rico's IHEs; Calls on DeVos to Abandon the Form-Based Process and Provide Guidance in Spanish," Center for American Progress, April 6, 2018, <https://www.americanprogress.org/press/release/2018/04/06/449155/release-cap-submits-comments-denouncing-devos-ripping-off-puerto-ricos-ihes-calls-devos-abandon-form-based-process-provide-guidance-spanish/>.

31 United States Census Bureau, "Population Estimates, July 1, 2018 (V2018)," <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/pr>.

32 Eduardo Berrios Torres, "La verdad sobre el Plan de Retiro de la UPR," *El Nuevo Día*, September 11, 2018, <https://www.elnuevodia.com/opinion/columnas/laverdadsobreelplanderetirodelaupr-columna-2446483/>.

33 Jose I. Alameda-Lozada and Alfredo González-Martínez. 2017. "El impacto socioeconómico del sistema de la Universidad de Puerto Rico," *Occasional Papers*, no. 7. San Juan, PR: Estudios Técnicos. <http://www.estudiostecnicos.com/pdf/occasionalpapers/2017/OP-No-7-2017.pdf>

34 Kimberly Leonard, "Building a Latino Wave in STEM," *U.S. News and World Report*, May, 19, 2016, <https://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2016-05-19/building-a-latino-wave-in-stem>; Santiago, Deborah. *Finding your Workforce: Latinos in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM)-Linking College Completion with U.S. Workforce Needs-2012-2013*. Washington, DC: Excelencia in Education, 2012. <https://www.edexcelencia.org/research/publications/finding-your-workforce-top-25-institutions-graduating-latinos>

the best K–12 teachers on the island.<sup>35</sup> It is a Land Grant and Sea Grant institution, and as such, it owns and operates botanical gardens, offers agricultural-extension services, and runs programs to help protect and responsibly utilize coastal areas.

Given the depth and range of the university’s positive impact on Puerto Rico’s economy and society and PROMESA’s expressed goal of promoting economic development for Puerto Rico, one would expect that the Junta would make the UPR the last, not the first, target for austerity measures. Faculty and students on the ground have some ideas as to why it was just the opposite. Austerity, not economic development, has been the Junta’s focus. The Junta’s neoliberal rationale is that moving investments from public to private hands will have a trickle-down effect on the economy. The public university, however, has historically been a site of resistance to such neoliberal reforms, whose failures been openly questioned and described by faculty experts, students, and workers. Indeed, higher education is, generally speaking, strongly linked to increased political participation, and a recent study carried out in Puerto Rico by Yarimar Bonilla, found that those who attended public institutions had much higher rates of what social scientists describe as “political knowledge” than those who attended private institutions.<sup>36</sup> UPR’s role as a cradle of island-wide political movements thus poses a threat to the highly unpopular Junta. Moreover, UPR is known for a robust student movement that has vigorously protested colonial intervention since 1948 and spearheaded national resistance to austerity measures in 1984, 2010, and, most recently, against the Junta itself in 2017.<sup>37</sup> Weakening UPR and its potential for resistance would no doubt favor a government body intent on slashing public resources.

Furthermore, the depth and range of the university’s positive impact on Puerto Rico’s economy and society also challenges an agenda of austerity and disaster profiteering that, in stifling economic development, has no interest in developing Puerto Rico’s young and brightest. With a plan that does not promote economic growth but rather focuses on austerity and the transferring of public funds to private profit, it would be a liability to have a highly educated group among the ranks of the unemployed or minimum-wage workers.

### **From public good to private profit**

The attacks on UPR and the public K–12 system cannot be viewed in isolation. We must take into account that, right after Hurricane Maria, private, non–Puerto Rican firms were given large contracts to carry out the process of rebuilding—often with disastrous

35 Maria de los A. Ortiz, “Informe final presentado al Consejo de Educación Superior de PR sobre indicadores de calidad en los programas de preparación de maestros en cuatro IES en Puerto Rico,” in *Division de Investigacion y Documentacion sobre la Educación Superior del Consejo de Educación Superior de Puerto Rico*.; Metro Puerto Rico. “Ejemplares 8 programas de Preparación de Maestros de la UPR.” Metro. Accessed May 26, 2019. <https://www.metro.pr/pr/noticias/2017/01/18/ejemplares-8-programas-preparacion-maestros-upr.html>.

36 D. Sunshine Hillygus, “The Missing Link: Exploring the Relationship between Higher Education and Political Engagement,” *Political Behaviour* 27 (March 2005); Jim Patterson, “Education Is the Key to Promoting Political Participation: Vanderbilt Poll,” *Research News @Vanderbilt*, June 25, 2012, <https://news.vanderbilt.edu/2012/06/25/education-key-to-promoting-political-participation/>; Yarimar Bonilla, “Puerto Rico’s American Dream”. Research Colloquium, Instituto de Investigaciones Interdisciplinarias, UPR-Cayey, October 20, 2016.

37 Juan Carlos Castillo, “Las huelgas estudiantiles de la UPR, aquellas que se repiten y continúan (Parte 1),” *Diálogo UPR*, June 30, 2015, <http://dialogoupr.com/las-huelgas-estudiantiles-de-la-upr-aquellas-que-se-repiten-y-continuan-parte-i/>; Rima Brusi-Gil de Lamadrid, “The University of Puerto Rico: A Testing Ground for the Neoliberal State,” *NACLA Report on the Americas*, May 12, 2011, <https://nacla.org/article/university-puerto-rico-testing-ground-neoliberal-state>; Cynthia López Cabán, “La mayoría de los recintos de la UPR están en huelga indefinida,” *El Nuevo Día*, April 6, 2017, <https://www.elnuevodia.com/noticias/locales/nota/lamayoriadelosrecintosdelauprestanenhuelgaindefinida-2307616/>.

results.<sup>38</sup> Now plans are underway to sell Puerto Rico's electric utility as the government invites hedge funds and bankers associated with the blockchain industry to invest in Puerto Rico.<sup>39</sup> Protected areas of high ecological value are also being targeted for sale, and a portion of the public-education budget will be funneled into the coffers of private and charter schools.<sup>40</sup> These transformations need to be understood as part of a broad, violent takeover of disaster capitalism, in which those who stand to profit from Puerto Rico's tragedy have been gifted not by one but two disasters: Puerto Rico's unpayable debt (around \$72 billion in bonds and \$50 billion in pension obligations), and Hurricanes Irma and Maria, with estimated damages of \$90 billion (\$133 million for the university) and a death toll in the thousands.<sup>41</sup>

How will disaster capitalism play out for public schools and college campuses? Some of the implications are quite predictable. On an island where over 40 percent of the population and over 50 percent of children live under the poverty line, the students affected most by these cuts are precisely the ones with the greatest need.<sup>42</sup> This is not only because of the potential exclusion of special education students from charter schools or a spiked university tuition, but also because some of the closed schools and smaller campuses targeted for closure largely serve low-income, place-bound students in poorer municipalities. These students are likely to drop out, migrate, or be absorbed by the US mainland's charter or for-profit college industry, which already markets heavily to them—with some of the very same actors and substandard results.

In higher education, for-profit companies are, unsurprisingly, lobbying heavily and successfully for decreased regulation and more freedom from public scrutiny, and institutions serving Puerto Rican students are no exception.<sup>43</sup> A large, nominally nonprofit system on the island is expanding its for-profit arm, targeting Puerto Rican students who have moved to Florida, and for-profit colleges are vying for a contract to take over Puerto Rico's police academy.<sup>44</sup> In this context, it is very telling that Puerto Rico's only (and nonvoting) representative in the House, Resident Commissioner Jennifer González, recently submitted a bill designed to relax the regulations on for-profit higher-education institutions in Puer-

38 Vann R. Newkirk II, "The Puerto Rican Power Scandal Expands," *Atlantic*, November 3, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/11/puerto-rico-whitefish-cobra-fema-contracts/544892/>; Patricia Mazzei and Agustín Armendariz, "FEMA Contract Called for 30 Million Meals for Puerto Ricans. 50,000 Were Delivered," *New York Times*, February 6, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/06/us/fema-contract-puerto-rico.html>.

39 Dawn Giel and Seema Mody, "Puerto Rico Lures Blockchain Industry to Help Fund Its Comeback," *CNBC*, March 16, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/03/16/puerto-rico-lures-blockchain-industry-to-help-fund-its-comeback.html>.

40 Gerardo E. Alvarado Leon, "El gobierno mercadea 17 terrenos protegidos," *El Nuevo Día*, May 10, 2018, <https://www.elnuevodia.com/noticias/locales/nota/elgobiernomercadea17terrenosprotegidos-2421335/>.

41 Daniel Uria, "Hurricane Maria Caused \$90B of Damage in Puerto Rico," *UPI*, April 9, 2018, <https://www.upi.com/Hurricane-Maria-caused-90B-of-damage-in-Puerto-Rico/6421523309427/>; Claire Cleveland, "Without Researchers or Funds, Puerto Rico Universities Grapple with Future after Hurricane Maria," *Cronkite News*, May 4, 2018, <https://cronkitenews.azpbs.org/2018/05/04/puerto-rico-universities-grapple-with-future-after-hurricane-maria/>.

42 United States Census Bureau, "Population Estimates, July 1, 2018 (V2018)," <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/pr>; Bianca Faccio, "Left Behind: Poverty's Toll on the Children of Puerto Rico," *Child Trends*, March 28, 2016, <https://www.childtrends.org/left-behind-povertys-toll-on-the-children-of-puerto-rico>; Rima Brusi, Walter Díaz, and David González, "So Close and So Far: 'Merit,' Poverty, and Public Higher Education in Puerto Rico," *Revista de Ciencias Sociales*, 2010, <https://revistas.upr.edu/index.php/rcs/article/view/7470/6074>.

43 Michelle Chen, "Why Are New York's Public Funds Going to For-Profit College Tuition?," *Nation*, April 5, 2018, <https://www.thenation.com/article/why-are-new-yorks-public-funds-going-to-for-profit-college-tuition/>.

44 "Brook v. Sistema Universitario Ana G. Méndez, Inc.," *Casetext*, May 4, 2017, <https://casetext.com/case/brook-v-sistema-universitario-ana-g-mendez-inc>; Keila López Alicea, "Una universidad entrenaría a los futuros policías," *El Nuevo Día*, July 6, 2018, <https://www.elnuevodia.com/noticias/seguridad/nota/unaversidadentrenariaalosfuturosolicias-2433190/>.



## DISMANTLING PUBLIC EDUCATION IN PUERTO RICO

to Rico.<sup>45</sup> Specifically, the bill seeks to increase these colleges' access to public funding. González has not used her position in Washington to advocate for the public university, even though the latter graduates the most students on the island, has a better record of gainful employment for alumni than its private counterparts, and has a better and greater impact than them on the economy.

Most ironically, some of the actors that stand to benefit from the privatization of Puerto Rico's educational institutions are closely connected to holders of Puerto Rico's bond debt. This is the case, for example, of Apollo Education Group, the corporation behind the University of Phoenix, which is partly owned by Apollo Global Management, a bondholder in Puerto Rico's debt.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, Canyon Capital and Stone Lion Capital, two of the main holders of Puerto Rico's bond debt, have strong links with the charter school industry.<sup>47</sup>

The dangers faced by students at for-profits in Puerto Rico are the same as those that have been described in the fifty states. With few exceptions, for-profits have dismal graduation rates and offer low-quality degrees. Students who attend them are often left in debt with no degree and no job.<sup>48</sup> UPR, by contrast, has the opposite track record: it boasts the best overall graduation rate in Puerto Rico and has been recognized by many scholars as an engine of social mobility that helped move previous generations out of poverty and into middle-class status. While student advocates in the United States denounce the fact that only about 10 percent of flagship public colleges are affordable for low-income students, 64 percent of students at UPR's main campus are low income.

Renowned economists around the world, and even the IMF itself, have concluded that we need more, not fewer, of these examples.<sup>49</sup> Austerity measures cannot help broken economies and in fact do more harm than good. The attacks on Puerto Rican public education and economic development as a whole will further decrease upward mobility, hamper economic growth, and increase the island's already soaring social inequality. Indeed, austerity measures combined with failure to promote economic development before Hurricane Maria have made Puerto Rico one of the countries with the highest Gini coefficient, a standard measure of economic inequality, ranking fifth in the world. After the hurricane, social inequality worsened, and Puerto Rico ranked third among 101 countries overall, surpassed only by Zambia and South Africa.<sup>50</sup>

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45 "H.R. 5850-Puerto Rico Higher Education Disaster Relief Act," Congress.gov, 2017-2018, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/5850/text?format=txt>.

46 Alan Mintz et al., "Hedgepapers No. 17-Hedge Fund Vultures in Puerto Rico," *Hedge Clippers*, July 10, 2015, <http://hedgeclippers.org/hedgepapers-no-17-hedge-fund-billionaires-in-puerto-rico/>.

47 Joel Cintron Arbasetti, "La trayectoria de los fondos de cobertura que llegaron a Puerto Rico," Centro de Periodismo Investigativo, July 14, 2015, <http://periodismoinvestigativo.com/2015/07/la-trayectoria-de-los-fondos-de-cobertura-que-llegaron-a-puerto-rico/>.

48 Mamie Lynch, Jennifer Engle, and Jose Luis Cruz, "Subprime Opportunity: The Unfilled Promise of For-Profit Colleges and Universities," Education Trust, November 22, 2010, <https://edtrust.org/resource/subprime-opportunity-the-unfulfilled-promise-of-for-profit-colleges-and-universities/>.

49 Yalixa Rivera and Jonathan Levin, "Puerto Rico's Fiscal Plan Was Doomed Even before Maria, Stiglitz Says," Bloomberg, January 16, 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-01-16/puerto-rico-fiscal-plan-doomed-even-before-maria-stiglitz-says>; Larry Elliott, "Austerity Policies Do More Harm Than Good, IMF Study Concludes," *Guardian*, May 27, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2016/may/27/austerity-policies-do-more-harm-than-good-imf-study-concludes>.

50 *El Nuevo Día*, "Puerto Rico es el tercer país de mayor desigualdad económica del mundo," September 17, 2018, <https://www.elnuevodia.com/negocios/economia/nota/puertoricoeseltercerpaisdemayordesigualdadeconomicaelmundo-2447734/>.

## DESCOLONIZAR LA PAZ

Cutting funding to the public education system spurs the growth of private and for-profit institutions and reduces access to affordable educational opportunities, exacerbating the negative effects of Maria and increasing the island's already out of control inequality. In this context, Puerto Rico's colonial condition and its concomitant lack of sovereign powers facilitate not only the payment of a dubious debt to the detriment of social services but also profit-making for powerful and extraneous economic actors, some of which are also debt holders, all at the expense of people's right to access quality education and improve their life chances. Marginalizing those who raise their voice against these failed strategies and defunding the public institutions that promote this awareness might quell political resistance to austerity temporarily, in the aftershocks of the Hurricane. But the rush to implement this failed script in Puerto Rico, and to let it guide policy especially in the delicate and important realm of public education, will surely lead to more inequality, increased unrest, and resistance. For students, their struggling families, and other vulnerable groups, this man-made storm started long ago and shows no signs of stopping.

Brusi, R. & Gordreau, I. Dismantling public education in Puerto Rico. En Yudkin Suliveres, A. & Pascual Morán, A. (Eds.). *Descolonizar la paz: Entramado de saberes, resistencias y posibilidades*. Antología conmemorativa del 25 aniversario de la Cátedra UNESCO de Educación para la Paz. Cátedra UNESCO de Educación para la Paz, Universidad de Puerto Rico. ISBN 978-0-578-23166-2. <http://unescopaz.uprrp.edu/antologia25.html>