

# Puerto Rico's Public School Closures

Community Effects and Future Paths



This report is published by the Othering & Belonging Institute at UC Berkeley and the Centro para la Reconstrucción del Hábitat. The Othering & Belonging Institute brings together researchers, community stakeholders, and policy-makers to identify and challenge the barriers to an inclusive, just, and sustainable society in order to create transformative change.

Centro para la Reconstrucción del Hábitat (“CRH”) is a non-profit dedicated to changing how vacant and abandoned properties are dealt with in order to leverage their conversion as assets for community-based and long-term transformation. CRH is the only organization promoting education, applied research, cross-sectoral collaboration, and public policy to tackle blight in Puerto Rico.

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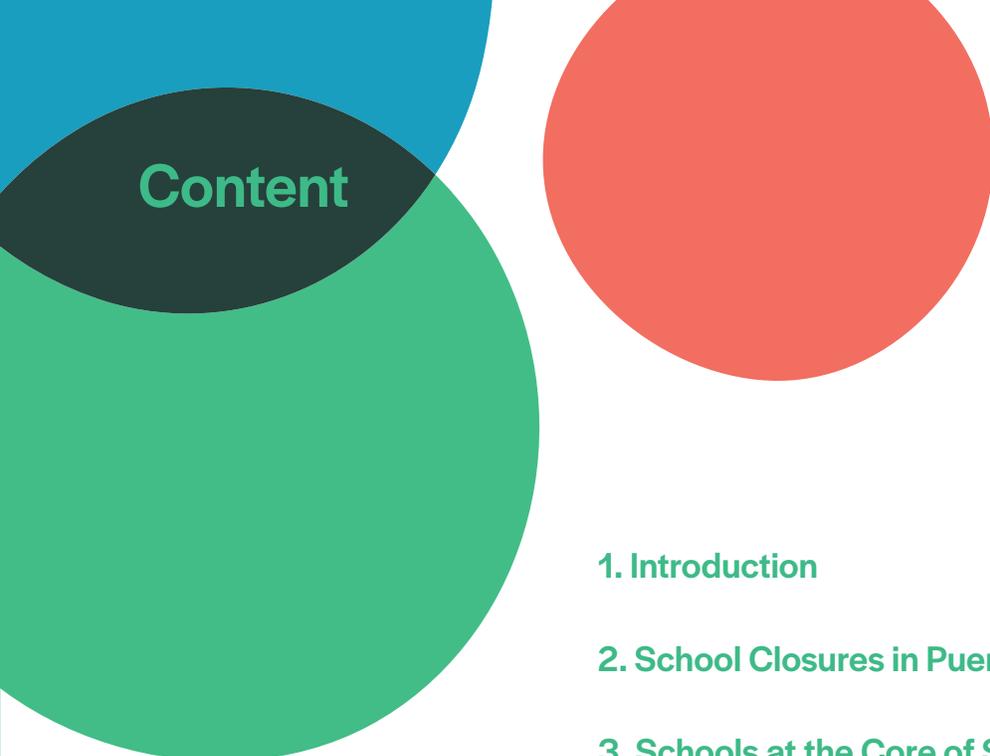
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# 1. Introduction

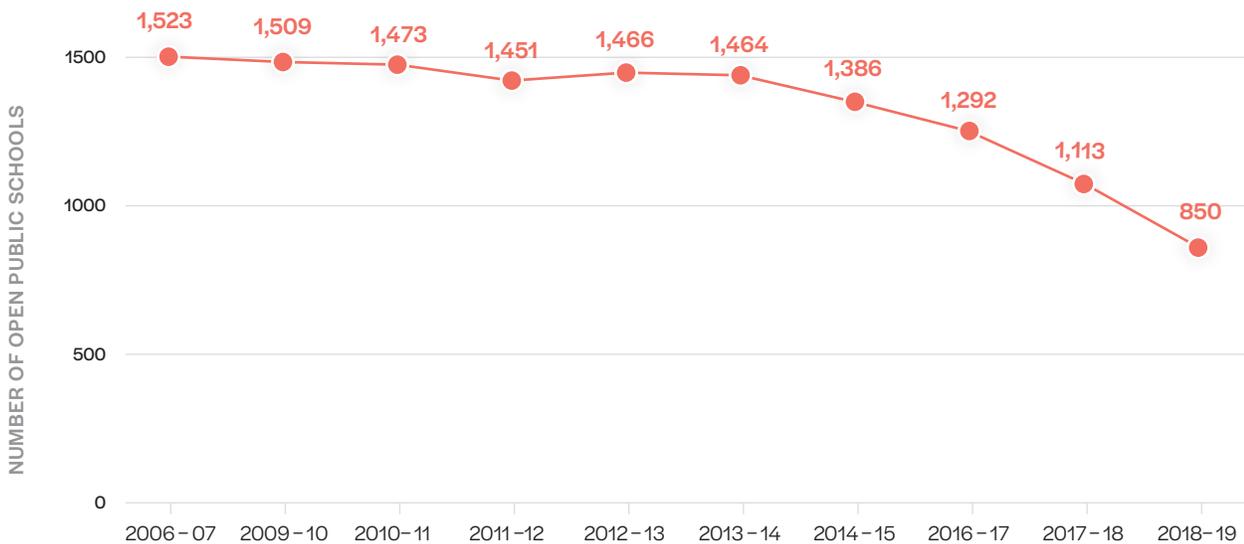
**THE PUERTO RICO DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION** (DE) has closed nearly half of the public schools in Puerto Rico since 2007 (figure 1). Puerto Rico is not alone; there is a broader trend of school closures in districts across the United States, from Philadelphia to Oakland to Washington, DC. But Puerto Rico shuttered an unprecedented 673 schools (44%) in eleven years, far outpacing the rate of change and the number of closures in Chicago (figure 2)—the US school district with the second-largest number of school closures.<sup>1</sup> The impact of Puerto Rico’s closures on students, families, and surrounding

neighborhoods is profound, yet it has been largely regarded as collateral damage of a necessary restructuring.<sup>2</sup> This report analyzes the human impact of the closures, the current state of the schools that have been closed, the response by affected communities, and strategies for a pathway forward.

Schools in Puerto Rico carry particular meaning related to the archipelago’s environmental and historical context.<sup>3</sup> Schools serve as essential sites for emergency response and recovery during and after hurricanes. They also serve as central locations to

**FIGURE 1**

**Puerto Rico has closed 673 public schools (44%) since 2007**



Source: Comprehensive directories of public schools 2007 and 2019 from Open Data Puerto Rico Government Portal; accessed January 2020, <https://data.pr.gov/en/widgets/gb92-58gc>.

**FIGURE 2**

## Metropolitan Areas with Highest Rates of Recent Public School Closures

Puerto Rico has closed a greater proportion of public schools than any metropolitan region in the US in recent years.<sup>4</sup>

	Population <sup>5</sup> 2018, in millions	Student Enrollment 2018–2019	Number of closures	Percent closed in district
Philadelphia	1.584	202,767 <sup>6</sup>	30 in 1 year (2013) <sup>7</sup>	10%
Washington, DC	0.702	49,056 <sup>8</sup>	38 in 6 years (2008–2014) <sup>9</sup>	25%
Chicago	2.705	361,314 <sup>10</sup>	200 in 16 years (2002–2018) <sup>11</sup>	33%
Puerto Rico	3.195	300,000 <sup>12</sup>	673 in 11 years (2007–2018) <sup>13</sup>	44%

provide other essential community services, such as information and treatment when there is an outbreak of dengue and other illnesses threatening public health. Schools are places of intergenerational relations, where children are connected with elders who often attended the same schools decades earlier and have unique knowledge of the history of their community. Moreover, various generations of schools are part of the archipelago’s cultural heritage due to their invaluable historic and architectural significance, with some schools housing remarkable works of art. In many Puerto Rican communities, the school closures have meant the loss of place for community connection, public health, and resilience.

For much of Puerto Rico’s history, schools were run by the Catholic Church and available only to white male children of wealthy families. Following the great expansion of schools that took place beginning in the early twentieth century, education finally became accessible to the vast majority of Puerto Rican children in the 1950s; however, this was mainly as a result of the highly contested US colonial policy of Americanizing Puerto Rican children through the public school system.<sup>14</sup> Today’s mass school closures harken back to the period before the 1950s.

Since at least 2007, almost annually the DE announces school closures at the end of the school year, to go into effect the following fall. The Department unilaterally makes decisions regarding which schools to close. Most closures have lacked a transparent process and do not include impacted communities. Moreover, the Department has not implemented any official reassignment process, leaving parents alone with the arduous task to figure out which schools nearby remain open and are accepting new students. Based on conversations with community leaders from various urban and rural communities, the decision to close schools rarely involved affected families, teachers, social workers, or other personnel. Closures were often announced through the press without any comprehensive explanation or criteria used to make such determinations. When asked the reason for the drastic number of school closures, former Secretary of Education Julia Keleher stated, “Every year, we lose 20,000 kids.”<sup>15</sup>

The wave of school closures over the last decade weakened parent involvement and democratic governance, and limited access to education for children in some areas. In rural areas and some urban neighborhoods, the closures imply a longer

commute distance, which increases transportation costs and is a formidable barrier for families without a vehicle or with work schedules that conflict with school start and end times.

The current state of the closed school buildings varies, but most are still under government stewardship and have fallen into disrepair. For this study, researchers conducted site visits to a random selection of 119 closed school buildings, finding a large majority lying vacant, with many suffering abandonment and decay. This study also reviewed 123 publicly available contracts for sale, transfer, or leasing of school buildings from 2014 to 2019, which revealed that only about one-fifth of schools closed since 2007 have been sold or leased in the past five years. Additional site visits to fifty of these contracted schools revealed that only half have actually fulfilled their contracted purposes. (A more detailed explanation of the physical state of visited schools, as well as the corresponding definitions, are included in the section Physical Conditions and Current Use of Closed Schools.)

This evidence of mismanagement of public schools raises wide-reaching concerns, including those related to the Puerto Rican constitution. Similarly to many US state constitutions, but unlike the federal constitution, Puerto Rico's 1952 constitution defines certain rights to education<sup>16</sup>:

*Every person has the right to an education which shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. There shall be a system of free and wholly non-sectarian public education. Instruction in the elementary and secondary schools shall be free and shall be compulsory in the elementary schools to the extent permitted by the facilities of the state. No public property or public funds shall be used for the support of schools or educational institutions other than those of the state.*<sup>17</sup>

These rights and protections are in tension with a trend across the US of private sector interest in and acquisition of local and state government assets. In

particular, this tension arises with the most valuable local government assets, which are transportation, education, and water and sewer. For local governments in the mainland US, the value of buildings and land used for educational purposes constitute the second-largest asset values—second only to highways and streets.<sup>18</sup> The total asset value of educational structures is \$2.7 trillion—almost 24% of all assets valued in US state and local governments.<sup>19</sup> Given this, and the massive public school closures within Puerto Rico, measures are needed to keep those public assets in the public sphere, ensuring they serve public needs and remain accountable to the public. While educational buildings and land are valuable as a whole, the closed schools in Puerto Rico have by and large not been sold (only ten sold out of over 600 closed). Ultimately, school closures produce few savings while they generate substantial and wide-reaching costs and harm to students, families, neighborhoods, and the archipelago as a whole.

Preserving public assets and leveraging them to serve the public interest in Puerto Rico could become a model in how to navigate economic restructuring so that it serves residents and public institutions. This approach to public schools could allow Puerto Rico to address multiple public challenges it currently faces: extreme economic inequality and persistent poverty, climate change recovery and resilience, population loss, and a struggling education system. Transforming schools into high-quality, community-controlled public schools could be a key strategy for healthy, resilient communities and equitable economic development. This framework applies to both the schools that remain open and the sites of the closed schools. At the closed facilities, the public buildings and land are a unique public resource to be put to use through a participatory community planning process and sustained governmental support.

## 2. School Closures in Puerto Rico

**LIKE MANY LARGE DISTRICTS** in the US over the past decade, Puerto Rico has implemented several rounds of school closures. According to community members and a report issued by the Puerto Rico Civil Rights Commission, the process for closing schools did not engage the community or take into consideration input from students, families, teachers or faculty in meaningful, principled ways. The report by the Civil Rights Commission outlines the following conclusions:

- Children’s right to a public education was violated by carrying out a disorganized process without guidance or consultation.
- The participation of the students, parents and teachers, and the community was not incorporated in the determination of the closure of the schools, and they were excluded from the process.
- Proposals to take into consideration additional criteria in the process of closing schools from the teachers’ union, the communities, the students, the parents, the mayors, and even the Legislative Assembly were rejected by the DE.<sup>20</sup>

Rather, the Puerto Rico DE, under the leadership of the Secretary of Education, unilaterally decided which schools to close and typically announced the decision near the end of the school year to go into effect the following Fall. The authors of this report formally requested copies of any administrative orders, regulations, or circular letters outlining the process and have not been provided them as of the time of publication. Closings were carried out with absolutely no public hearings, a process that was also criticized by some lawmakers.<sup>21</sup> This opaque process had detrimental impacts on students, families, and communities.

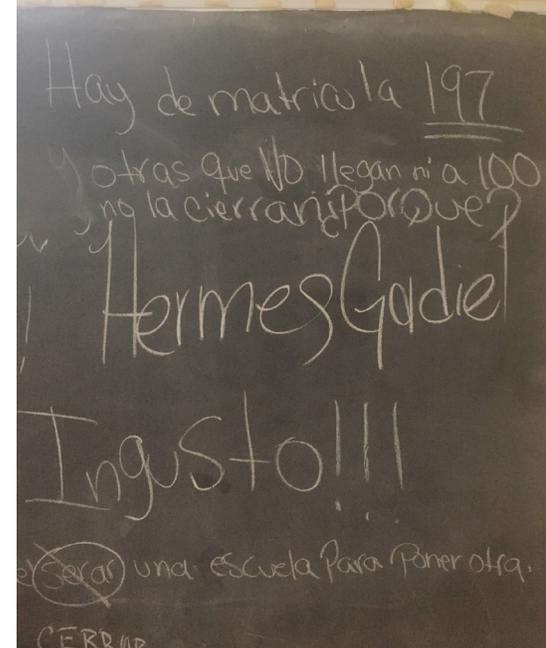


Graffiti at the Emilio Castelar school at San Juan. Translates into, “Mom, I had nightmares about Julia Keleher.”

In the mainland US overall, the number of schools has been relatively stable over the last decade, with an average of 1,700 closings per year between 2006 and 2016 (including conversions to charter schools).<sup>22</sup> This churning of educational systems—where one school is closed and another is opened—has involved the rapid expansion of charter schools, which increased 185% over ten years nationally.<sup>23</sup>

However, the number of school closures in Puerto Rico since 2007, both in absolute numbers (673) and proportional to the size of the district (44%), is





unprecedented anywhere else in the US (figure 2). The DE closed at least 150 schools between 2010 and 2015. Then in May 2017, former secretary of education Keleher announced the closing of 165 more schools to go into effect the following school year.<sup>24</sup> Even after Hurricanes Irma and Maria battered Puerto Rico in September 2017, Keleher announced and implemented the closure of at least 263 schools the following May 2018. The closures occurred as Puerto Rico struggled to recover basic infrastructure, including electricity, months after the hurricanes' devastating impacts and in the face of a severely lacking US federal and congressional response.

School closures have affected every corner of Puerto Rico (figure 3). However, rural areas have been disproportionately impacted, experiencing 65% of closures since 2006, according to researchers at Centro: Center for Puerto Rican Studies at Hunter College of the City University of New York.<sup>25</sup> Rural areas are especially vulnerable to the harmful community fracturing caused by a closed school, given their communities are often very isolated and close-knit, with limited spaces available to serve as community hubs. Additionally, because Puerto Rico lacks comprehensive public transportation, rural families' options to find alternative accessible schools for their children are limited. The transportation barrier also impacts school workers' abilities to get to new workplaces. (For more, see section Schools at the Core of Surrounding Communities.)

**FROM LEFT** Graffiti from the Segundo Ruíz Belvis school of San Juan. "Don't close schools."

Writing on a blackboard at Pedro G. Goyco school in San Juan, questioning the reasons for closure: "There are 197 enrolled students here while schools with under 100 remain open." Punctuation and spelling errors imply a student may have written it.

### 3. Schools at the Core of Surrounding Communities

**SCHOOLS IN PUERTO RICO** serve as polling stations during elections, shelters during hurricanes, and centers for emergency response during public health crises. These essential functions demonstrate that schools represent a community core for their neighborhoods. Understanding the effects of school closures requires a recognition of the wide-reaching meaning and web of relationships that schools hold. Far more than just buildings for protection from the elements during educational instruction, schools play essential roles in the social, economic, and cultural life of a community. In her study on the subject, Ariel Bierbaum identified numerous types of meaning and value of schools (figure 4). In the economic sphere, schools influence housing values, residents' future earnings, current income, district solvency, and the local tax base. In socio-spatial terms, schools affect the safe passage of children and families, offer social and political capital, and function as anchor institutions for community groups, businesses, and other networks. The symbolic and cultural value of schools includes their role as sites that define the identity of a place, people's sense of belonging, and a place to raise and address community concerns.

#### Community Identity and History

Long-standing neighborhood schools have great meaning for local families. In the mountainous town of Aguas Buenas, one grandmother spoke in a focus group about her grandchildren attending the Josefa Pastrana school. She herself had graduated from the same school decades earlier, forging a deeply personal and generational connection that is now lost due to the school's closure in 2013. Pastrana notified parents in the spring that it would not open again in the fall. According to a staff member, the regional



The entrance of the Luis Santaella school in Aguas Buenas features a triangular sign notifying citizens of the school's designation as a civil defense refuge.

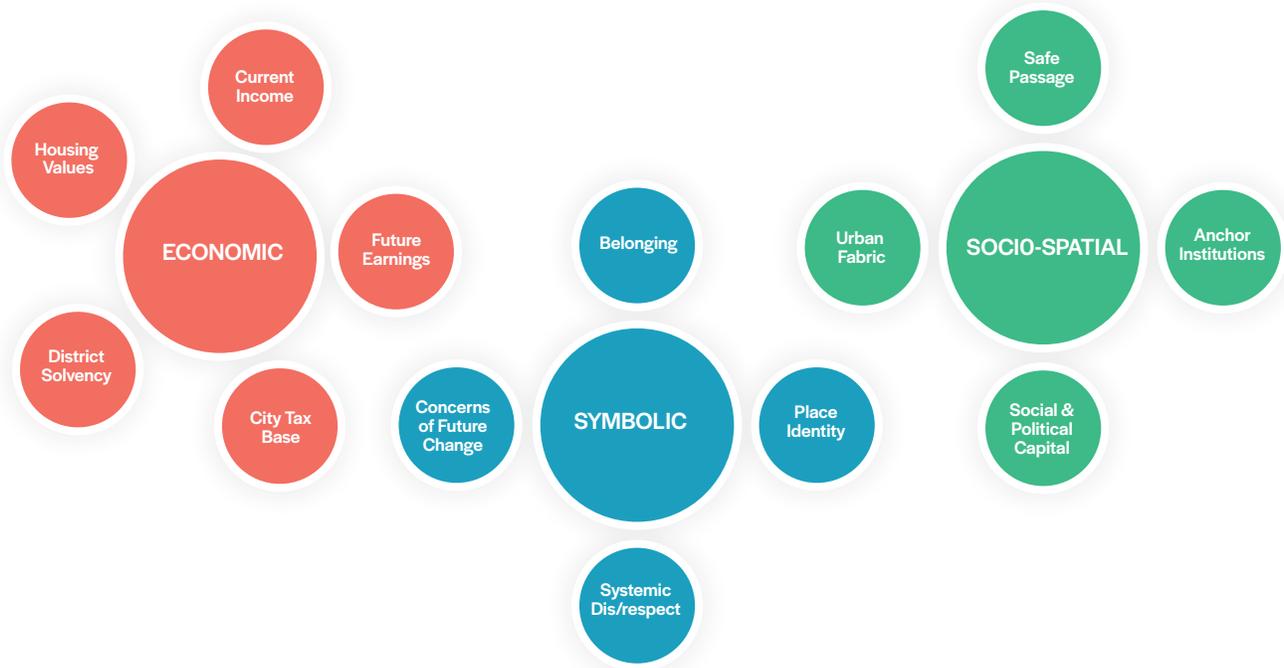
school district claimed that Pastrana would only be temporarily closed and would reopen as a middle school, which she believed circumvented parents and community members from organizing to oppose its closure. Pastrana's closure severed the family's relationship to its community and also to its own familial traditions, fracturing the community as parents scrambled to register their children in other schools. Some of the displaced students had to repeat the process again when their new school also announced closure the following year. Today, Pastrana school remains closed, vandalized, and scattered with garbage, rubble, textbooks, and even human waste.

"Some schools are supposed to be a monument to our history," Marina Moscoso Arabía, Coordinator of Casa Taft 169, shared as she led a tour of the Goyco elementary school in San Juan. The school, located in the Machuchal neighborhood, was named after Pedro G. Goyco, a nineteenth-century political leader and abolitionist, who may have been buried under the school, according to Moscoso. In 2015, parents of the students at Goyco received a letter notifying

**FIGURE 4**

## The Economic, Symbolic, and Socio-spatial Value of Schools in Communities

This is a conceptual framework for understanding the diverse types of value that schools provide to communities. It is from dissertation research by Ariel Bierbaum in 2016, drawing from her empirical research in Philadelphia as well as a review of relevant academic studies.



Source: Ariel Bierbaum, “Shifting Landscapes of Power and Privilege: School Closures and Uneven Development in Philadelphia” (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2016), pg. 58.

them the school would be closed within two months. There was no public meeting or consultation with parents before the decision was made, nor an organized process to reassign students to new schools. Similarly, of the 82 vacant schools visited for the purpose of this research, 8 (10%) were observable historic properties or had the potential of being declared as such.

The closure of the Goyco school and the overall trend of school closures fits in the broader historical context of Puerto Rico’s education system, which is a contested history with several transformations.<sup>26</sup> Originating with very few schools established by the Catholic Church before the nineteenth century, the first schools of Puerto Rico were available only to a small

number of white, male children. In the nineteenth century, education shifted to a growing public system still controlled by the Catholic Church, although it continued to serve only a narrow population and perpetuated racial, economic, and gender inequities. A snapshot of the children attending schools in 1864 provides context: Of an estimated 600,000 inhabitants, there were about 35,000 enslaved people, including about 5,250 enslaved children who were not permitted to attend school. Of the 84,750 free children, only 4,187 (less than 5%) attended school.<sup>27</sup>

During the twentieth century, the archipelago’s education system was transformed to a markedly expanded public and private school system, widely accessible and inclusive though still unequal in terms of social



Segundo Ruiz Belvis school in San Juan. The building has both architectural and historic value as a memorial place for its namesake, who was a Puerto Rican lawyer, philosopher, abolitionist, and pro-independence advocate. The marble slab covered by graffiti describes Belvis.

class and race.<sup>28</sup> The number of students in public schools rose, from 545,000 in 1956 to its peak of 728,000 students in 1978.<sup>29</sup> It is worth noting that the period of expanded access to education from 1930 to 1950 followed three hurricanes and a severe recession between 1928 and 1932. In response, Puerto Rican leaders developed the Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration, which was funded through New Deal legislation and resulted in the construction of 299 public schools, 38 secondary buildings, and new public university buildings, among other projects.<sup>30</sup>

After 1978, the overall population in Puerto Rico began a downward trend, as did the number of school age children, and the number of public schools and public school students declined. Over the thirty-year period of 1981 to 2011, the number of people under age eighteen decreased from 1,221,000 to 903,000

(-26%). The number of public schools in Puerto Rico was reduced from 1,803 to 1,464 (-18%). During the same period, the number of public school students fell from 710,000 to 453,000 (-28%), while the number of private school students rose by 60%. During the 2009-2010 academic year, there were some 461,000 students (78%) attending public schools and 130,000 students (22%) attending private schools.<sup>31</sup>

The widespread closures of public schools in Puerto Rico over the last decade are an intensification of a thirty-year trend. The generation of Puerto Ricans who attended school in the 1960s and 1970s recall an era of expanding access and improvements in quality. The closure of schools like Goyco is symbolic of the abandonment of this expansion and harkens to an earlier era of exclusionary access.

## Essential Community Centers

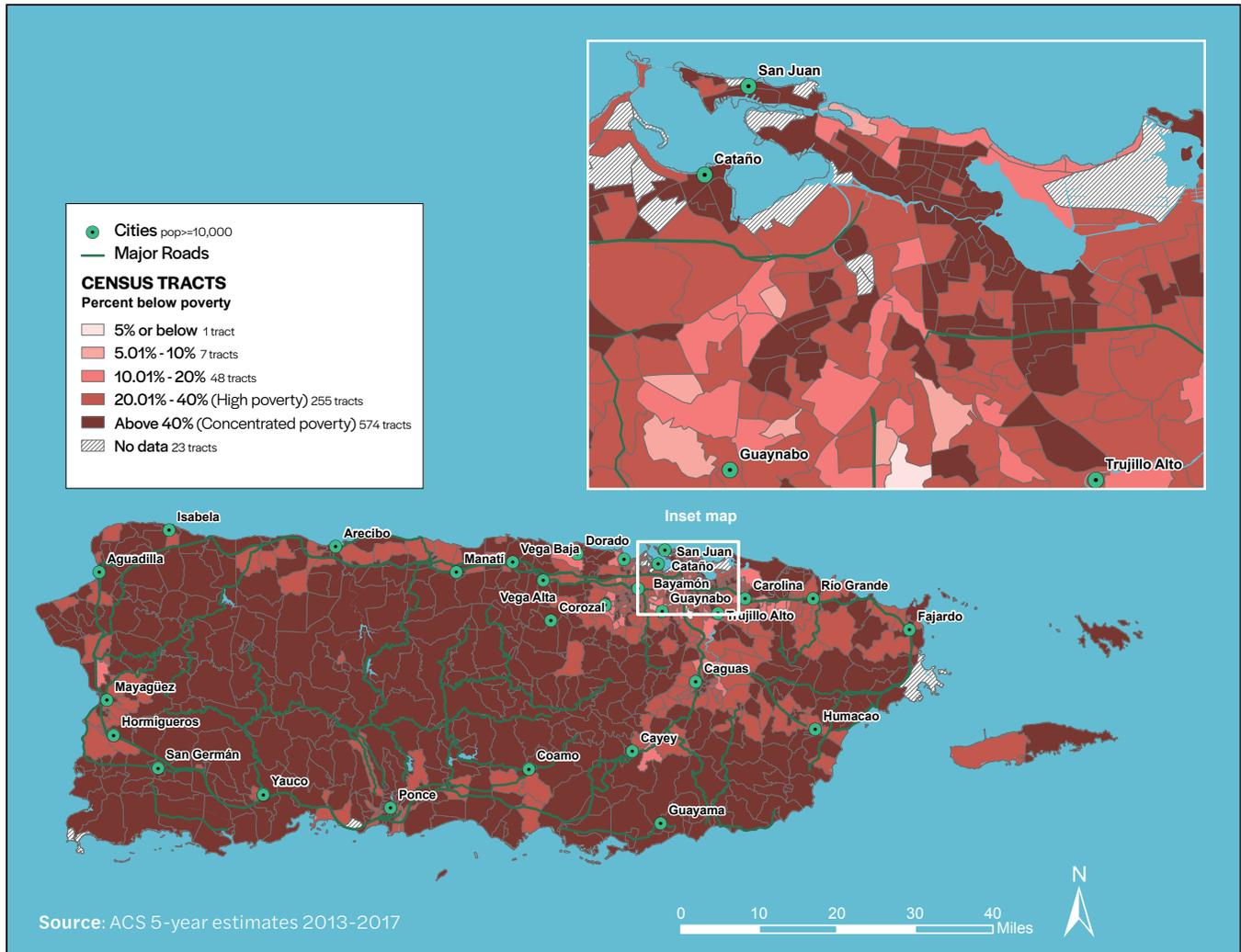
Schools are more than sites of learning for children. During the school year, thousands of children rely on food served at school to meet their daily nutritional intake, given that the majority of neighborhoods across the archipelago have high concentrations of families living below the poverty line (figure 5). Additionally, in Puerto Rico, school buildings often serve as emergency shelters during hurricanes, voting centers during elections, and a place of connection where parents and neighbors build trusting relationships with each other. They also serve as public health sites when there is an outbreak of dengue and other illnesses, becoming a central location to provide information and treatment. Of the 82 vacant school buildings visited for the purpose of this research (to be discussed further in the section Conditions at the Closed School Buildings), 36 (44%) schools featured some sort of sport or recreational facilities, such as basketball courts, baseball fields, or theatres, which in turn are often utilized by the greater community. Closed schools have resulted in the loss of these valuable community functions.

The term “community school” is used to reflect this broader role schools can have in Puerto Rico. Ana María García Blanco, Executive Director of Instituto Nueva Escuela, which supports Montessori public schools in Puerto Rico, explains: “A community school

**FIGURE 5**

## Poverty Rates by Census Tract

Students living in neighborhoods with high and concentrated poverty depend on school for daily meals.



is both a place and a set of partnerships between the school and other community resources. Its integrated focus on academics, health and social services, youth and community development, and community engagement leads to improved student learning, stronger families, and healthier communities. Schools become centers of the community and are open to everyone—all day, every day, evenings and weekends.” The community school brings together a range of actors who are vital for community well-being—of which student academic success and the student-teacher relationship is one part. In the case of Puerto Rico,

“community school” is a term that better captures the historic relationship between schools and the communities they serve.<sup>32</sup>

The unique characteristics of a community school advance the resilience of entire communities by providing services tailored for different parts of the communities they serve. Therefore, cutting off or dismantling a community school can exact a steep toll on communities.

Community school closures disrupt a unique sense of belonging that schools create. A closure can



As a sign of protest, parents left their students' uniforms pinned on the fence of the Luis Muñoz Grillo school in Caguas after it closed.

## Parent Participation and Democratic Governance

Testimonials on the absence of a planning process leading up to and following the school closures in Puerto Rico emphasize a central concern: “There was no study about the local context, what was needed, and how the school closure would affect us, so there was no plan for making the closures work,” as one community leader put it. At the Goyco school, some parents and volunteers felt the effort to close the school had started months prior to the announcement, when the administration made decisions to make the school environment “unbearable,” according to one parent, including lack of supervision, materials, teachers, clean working toilets, and other critical infrastructure. Parents were particularly upset when school leadership forced students to play during confined recreational time in the unshaded courtyard during the hottest part of the day, while the school lacked running potable water, which parents perceived as escalated and intentional disinvestment. The school had four different principals in the year before it closed, and volunteer projects like planting trees in the barren yard were denied support.

Given the multiple functions schools serve in the community, closures can have significant ripple effects on public participation and exacerbate distrust in government. For example, in a study in Richmond, Virginia, the process for closing schools “drove a rapid and antagonistic decision-making process that minimized broad-based public participation.”<sup>37</sup> The Pew Charitable Trusts’ Philadelphia study warned that such quick and opaque decision-making processes, which lack community input, can further increase distrust in both the school district and government in general, even leading to the ousting of public officials.<sup>38</sup> This trend played out in Puerto Rico during the political upheaval in summer 2019, which included the governor’s ouster following the Secretary of Education’s Julia Kehler resignation after multiple federal fraud indictments. The mass mobilizations that led to the resignations were due to many economic and political factors, and one consistent rallying cry at protests included the inhumane cuts to public services like education.

rupture intergenerational shared experiences, reduce parental and community involvement both at school and with their children’s education, and disperse the influence of the community in the governance of their school. These impacts alienate communities and erode belonging, described by Bonnie Benard as “a basic human need, a fundamental motivation, sufficient to drive behaviors and perceptions. [Feeling of belonging] leads to positive gains such as happiness, elation, achievement, and optimal functioning...Its importance cannot be stressed enough.”<sup>33</sup>

The association between individual and community resilience and a sense of belonging is well documented.<sup>34</sup> In particular, the role of belonging—defined as the positive effects of particular types of social capital—holds exceptional value in education for students, teachers, and the communities networked by schools. “Strong communities are connected communities, where people feel they belong, they matter, and their participation is facilitated.”<sup>35</sup> “Community” can be defined geographically, by communities of interests, or by communities of emotional connection and interdependence between community members, based on scholarship measuring these associations. “Schools that manage to combine all three [conceptions of community] are more likely to have high levels of social capital.”<sup>36</sup>

In a related study of majority Latinx schools in Santa Barbara, California, there was a 29% drop in parent participation following school closures, including drops in attending parent-teacher conferences, Parent Teacher Association meetings, or accompanying field trips.<sup>39</sup> Parents reported that they participated more in the original schools preclosure because of the sense of neighborhood community, including cultural activities and proximity. The loss of belonging negatively affected parent involvement. In Puerto Rico, partly due to the lack of a systematized reassignment process for students attending a school slated for closure, some parents are unable to participate in new schools because each of their children end up attending different schools. For example, one parent's neighbor had three children who each went to a different school after their original elementary and middle schools shut down at different times, leaving the parent with longer commutes and less time to participate in any of the three schools. Combining or "consolidating" elementary, middle, and/or high schools also increases the frequency of displacement for students. A student starting their first year of middle school, for example, may find themselves transferring to a new school for a third time in three years if the new receptor school closes.

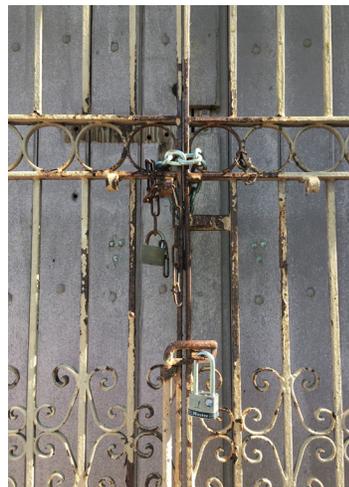
Teachers, parents, and students repeatedly shared how there was rarely clear communication from the DE regarding the criteria for selecting certain schools for closure, and there was never a clear process for the actual closure and where students

would go. One parent had a child's school close that was a few blocks from their home. They found a new school they were relatively happy with that was a fifteen-minute drive. But after only two years in the new school, they heard in April 2018 that it would be closing in May. Similarly, an educator who was facilitating a community workshop shared that a participant was in his third high school in as many years due to closures.

Taken together, consistent reports of wholly lacking strategies to consult with parents and communities, to systematize transfer processes postclosure, or to tailor strategies to the different situations of distinct places suggest there was inadequate or no consideration of site-specific needs of Puerto Rican residents. The Department, under Secretary Julia Keleher's leadership, consistently cited student population decline as the sole rationale for closures, which indicates that decision-makers considered the role of school singularly as "educator." This ignores the robust community value of schools described above.

## Access to Education

School closures can affect students' educational experience in myriad ways with changes in location, administration, teachers, student body, facilities, and services offered. Regarding proximity and commute distances, families with low-incomes often do not own cars, creating daily challenges to survive with extremely limited or no access to public



**FROM LEFT** Moises Meléndez school in San Juan is an active site of a community take-over, which is attempting to combat the negative effects of the closure.

The locked entrance to Segundo Ruíz Belvis school in San Juan.



An empty hallway at Goyco elementary school after the school closed following what parents understood as intentional disinvestment and decisions to make the learning environment “unbearable.”

transportation (whose limited network is concentrated in urban centers). For these families, the additional distance to a new school can be very costly. “The cost on families is higher now that we have to transport the kids further and pay someone to pick them up,” reported one parent in a rural area of Puerto Rico. Other community members reported witnessing students walking long distances on steep and sometimes dangerous roads. As new schools are often further away, families experience longer travel times and greater expenses, which can force an entire family to change their routine and search for pooled resources, such as needing to coordinate borrowing a car from a neighbor in order to get their children to the new school.

In the 2015–2016 school year, for example, a total of 32,685 students received school transportation from the government, with applications for the 2019–2020

school year mushrooming to 80,323, despite a shrinkage in student population.<sup>40</sup> As travel time to school increases, research shows students are less able to participate in both extracurricular and in-home activities and have less time for homework; when the commute is over thirty minutes, studies show it impacts both the student and their whole family.<sup>41</sup> In fact, dropout rates in Puerto Rico have more than tripled from the 2014–2015 school year to 2019–2020.<sup>42</sup>

## Social Inclusion and Equity

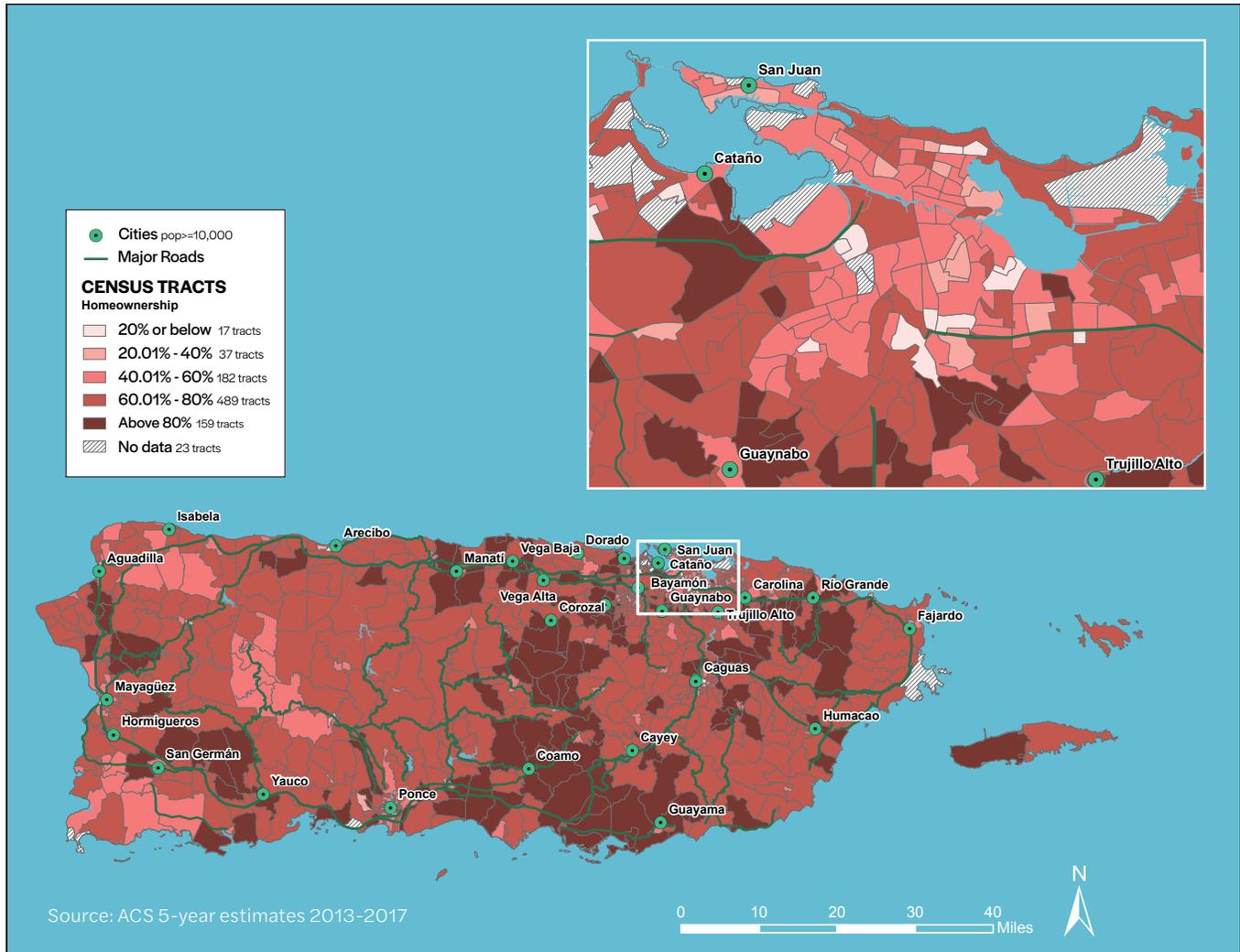
Puerto Rico is a territory composed of majority Latinx and Afro-Latinx people.<sup>43</sup> Figure 5 shows that 94% of neighborhoods have high poverty (between 20% and 40% below the federal poverty line) or concentrated poverty (over 40% below the federal poverty line). More importantly, data recently published by the Youth Development Institute of Puerto Rico states that 57% of minors in Puerto Rico live under the poverty level, with 39% suffering extreme poverty.<sup>44</sup> There is no state in the mainland US with demographics comparable to those of Puerto Rico, or that has experienced school closures at the scale of Puerto Rico. The mainland cities that have closed a significant portion of their public schools, including Chicago, which shuttered 33% of its district between 2002 and 2018 (closed 200 schools),<sup>45</sup> and Washington, DC, which closed 25% of its schools since 2008 (48 schools), also have student populations that are predominantly African American and Latinx and come from low-income communities.<sup>46</sup>

From Chicago to Philadelphia to Puerto Rico, school closures disproportionately impact students who belong to low-income families or are otherwise marginalized, including students of color and those with special needs.<sup>47</sup> Exacerbating these social and racial inequities, school closures often weaken protection from discrimination by obfuscating situations where nondiscrimination clauses apply, particularly harming LGBTQ staff and students, as well as students with disabilities.<sup>48</sup> For example, voucher programs, including the one instituted by Puerto Rico’s 2018 Education Reform law, can be used for religious schools that may exclude or psychologically harm LGBTQ staff or students or have otherwise selective

**FIGURE 6**

## Homeownership Rates by Census Tract in Puerto Rico

There are high rates of homeownership in Puerto Rico, though unlike in the US mainland, tenure does not correlate with income.

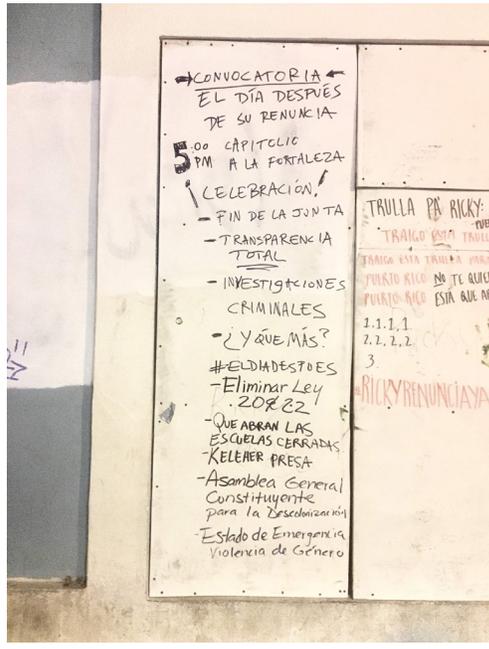


Despite the high rate of homeownership across Puerto Rico, people are living in concentrated poverty areas where schools are closing at high rates.

enrollment that do not serve the needs of students with disabilities.

In Chicago, schools receiving reassigned students with special needs were not prepared with adequate staff and services to support their special education.<sup>49</sup> Increased traumatic violence, such as assaults on students traveling to their new school through neighborhoods with rivaling gangs, has been re-

ported by parents and their children who attend new schools due to closures in Philadelphia, Kansas City, and Chicago.<sup>50</sup> Though there lacks research in this area for Puerto Rico, a few media reports have hinted toward a connection between violence and school closings.<sup>51</sup> Service providers and educators in Puerto Rico have also reported an increase in anxiety among students who were unsure if or when their



**FROM LEFT** A poster on the closed Madame Luchetti school in San Juan reads, “Education rots in the colony’s container,” in clear reference to the hundreds of dead bodies stored in containers after Hurricane Maria. By the time of this publication, the doors and windows of the Luchetti school had been stolen.

Among the summer 2019 graffiti is a list of demands for “the day after” the governor resigned: “Reopen abandoned schools” and “Lock up Keleher.”

school might close and were uncertain about where they would attend next in that event.

According to Puerto Rico’s Red por los Derechos de la Niñez y la Juventud, an association of service providers, youth in custody of the state have been uniquely affected by closures because changing schools often means new caseworkers and potential loss of access to special service. When youth in custody of the state are moved to a new school, it can often mean they need to move living facilities, and each facility must figure out transportation for students.

School closures can also exacerbate racial segregation and inequality. In a study of Richmond, Virginia’s school district from 2006 to 2010, school closures were associated with higher levels of segregation, going from a 0.65 to 0.7 score for the white-black dissimilarity index, considered “highly segregated.”<sup>52</sup> Further analysis is needed to determine whether this is evident in Puerto Rico. Because of how schools are funded through property taxes in the mainland US, neighborhoods with higher homeownership correlate with higher median income and better performing schools. Figure 6 underscores the unique context of Puerto Rico compared to US states because census tracts with high rates of homeownership do not correlate with higher incomes or fewer

closed schools. Additionally, Puerto Rico does not have local school districts, as all schools fall under the centralized DE and operate independent of municipal property tax bases. Yet, like many families in the mainland US, when Puerto Rican families consider buying property, they often take into account the presence and proximity of a school. When comparing the homeownership rate (figure 6) to the geography of closed schools (figure 3), it is clear homeownership rates do not insulate against school closures. This is partly due to Puerto Rico’s funding structure for education, which is unrelated to property tax revenue as there is no funding from local sources for education in Puerto Rico.<sup>53</sup>

## 4. Conditions at the Closed School Buildings

### Physical Conditions and Current Use of Closed Schools

Communities across Puerto Rico are wrestling with what to do with over 650 closed school buildings. “There hasn’t been a study or plan for how to use the closed school buildings. They haven’t considered what the community needs and how to plan the reuse,” reported one leader. A Pew Charitable Trust study of closed school buildings in US states revealed that the longer schools are closed, the more difficult they are to repurpose; it also explained that school buildings in general are challenging to turn into any other use given their size and layout, including wide hallways and shared bathrooms.<sup>54</sup>

Most closed school buildings in Puerto Rico are still unused and have become blighted. In many cases, the closing of a school means more than the closing of a number of classrooms, a public library, or a cafeteria, but also the loss of theatres, playing fields, and other recreational and sport facilities. For example, out of the 673 schools that have closed since 2007, only 123 (18%) were formally contracted for reuse between 2014 and 2019. While some schools may have been leased or transferred prior to the public records being available beginning in 2014, the majority likely remain abandoned or without official use.

For the purpose of this report, researchers visited a random sample of 144 closed schools (out of 673 closed since 2007). The sample was selected from both official lists and press reports in order to assess their condition.<sup>55</sup> Of these, 119 had been closed.<sup>56</sup>

In total, only a quarter of the closed schools (30 schools) have been reused for some new purpose. On the other hand, 82 (69%) of the remaining



The Dr. Martin Grove Brumbaugh school in San Juan lies abandoned though structurally intact. The large inventory of empty schools has led some to demand that they be reopened in order to relocate students affected by schools left damaged by the earthquakes of January 2020.

FIGURE 7

### Majority of Closed Schools Still Vacant

Out of 144 visited school buildings, most (82) are vacant and have yet to be re-used.

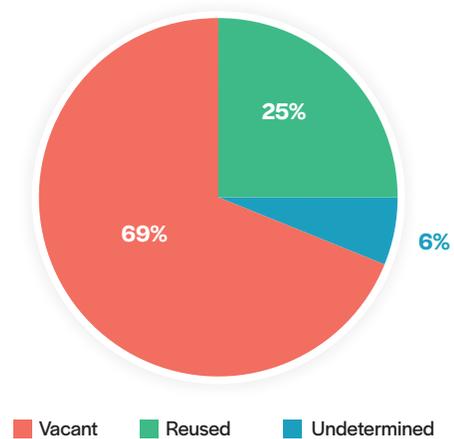


FIGURE 8

## Dilapidation at Vacant Schools

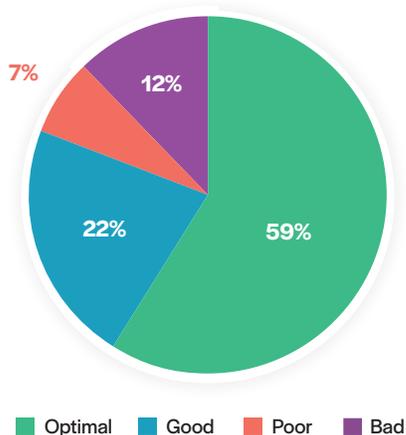
Out of 82 visited vacant schools, there was a variety of observable cases of dilapidation or potential risks.



FIGURE 9

## Current Physical Conditions of Vacant School Buildings

Out of 82 vacant school buildings visited, most (48) are in “optimal” condition. Nevertheless, almost a fifth (19) are either “poor” or “bad.”



schools lie vacant with many in a regressive state of abandonment. Researchers could not determine if 7 (6%) of the schools were in use or not (figure 7). Of those vacant, 59 (41%) of these closed school buildings suffer from at least some degree of dilapidation, damage, or safety risk. It is common to observe in these schools stolen or missing doors and windows (33 schools, 40%), the accumulation of trash (26 schools, 32%) and construction debris (21 schools, 26%), and graffiti (5 schools, 7%), as shown in Figure 8. Of all closed and vacant schools visited, 44 (53%) have green areas where vegetation has grown twelve inches or higher, with two (2%) being completely shrouded by vegetation.

We identified a variety of cases of dilapidation, evaluating and categorizing the current physical state of vacant closed schools utilizing a scale of 1–4. On the scale, 1 was “optimal” (lack of cleanliness, paint, or upkeep of green areas), 2 was “good” (with vandalism and damaged or stolen air conditioner units, windows, doors, or railings), 3 was “poor” (with chipping walls, roof leakage, broken tubing, and rusted metal), and 4 was “bad” (with structural problems or broken walls). Of those vacant schools visited, 48 (59%) were classified as “optimal,” 18 (22%) as “good,” 6 (7%) as “poor,” and 10 (12%) as “bad” (figure 9). Of those listed as “bad,” 2 (or 20%) were recently closed in 2018 and 4 (40%) were closed in 2017, demonstrating the potential for rapid deterioration.

As for nonofficial uses, one prevalent and improvised use for 9 (11%) vacant schools included converting sites to clandestine horse stables for nearby residents, which has been reported throughout the archipelago, though these processes are haphazard and often do not involve full participation from the community. Finally, only one school (1%) was inhabited by persons and another 4 (5%) had evidence of casual human use, such as used mattresses or evidence of drug use.

In some areas, parents were working to reopen their closed school. “The community fought for four years to keep the school open. We were told that the closure was going to happen, that it was a done deal. They did close it, but we are still fighting to reopen it,” shared a parent in Aguas Buenas. Following a



The Segundo Ruíz Belvis school in San Juan playing field. Photo taken January 21, 2020.

wave of earthquakes that devastated Puerto Rico's southern municipalities in early 2020, and facing a growing inventory of still-open schools that have been deemed unsafe to occupy, Governor Wanda Vázquez is exploring the possibility of reopening previously closed schools to relocate affected classrooms at the time of writing.<sup>57</sup> The destruction caused by the earthquakes to multiple open schools across Puerto Rico highlights the lack of criteria applied over the past decade to determine which schools close and why. Of the 82 vacant schools surveyed for this research, for example, 24 (29%) were single-level structures with 15 (18%) of these also in optimal or good condition.

## Sales and Leasing of Closed Schools

Following closure, public schools in Puerto Rico have been made available for lease or for sale, though the majority remain empty without contracts. Per available public records spanning from 2014 to 2019, Puerto Rico signed 123 contracts for sale, transfer, or leasing of school buildings for reuse. The number of contracted schools for reuse represents about a third of all schools closed since 2007, implying that up to four-fifths of closed schools remain without any usage plans. (These figures do not include schools that may have been leased or transferred prior to the contract registries available beginning in 2014, or via other seldomly used types of transfer.)<sup>58</sup>

Ten of the 123 contracted properties were sold (nine to corporations and one to an individual buyer). The average selling price was \$411,300. The largest contract was in 2019 for a pair of schools on a single site for \$780,000 to Mr. Bull, LLC, a company with ties to commercial office, retail, residential, and hospitality oriented real estate and development. This corporation is connected to two other entities that also bought school buildings in 2019: Mr. Blue Ocean and Shinrai Holdings, for \$260,000 and \$500,000 respectively. When the research team visited, none of these schools had been converted to shopping malls and were either still vacant or had undetermined current use. Of the ten purchased school buildings, one remains a school: Caguas Learning Academy, purchased by John F. Kennedy school for \$470,000 in May 2019 and now runs a private for-profit school on the site. A total of 80% of all contracts are for leases with the symbolic amount of \$1, demonstrating the limited revenue source reused schools offer.

The remaining 113 school buildings that were not purchased were leased to the following entities for various uses (figure 10):

- 14 for private and/or for-profit schools, and over one-third (5) of these new schools are Christian.
- 34 for educational nonprofits offering programs like after-school tutoring, arts and music classes, and daycares and Head Start programs.



**FROM TOP** The Josefa Pastrana school in Aguas Buenas has been stripped of doors, windows, air conditioning units, copper wiring, and plumbing.

The Josefa Pastrana school in Aguas Buenas is now being utilized as a makeshift dumping site for garbage and construction debris. The site borders a ravine and neighbors a densely populated urban center.



The María Libertad Gómez school in Toa Baja was closed in 2016. Per the scale created for the purpose of this study, buildings with signs of vandalism and missing windows would be considered in good shape if there exists no evidence of chipping walls, roof leakage, or structural problems.

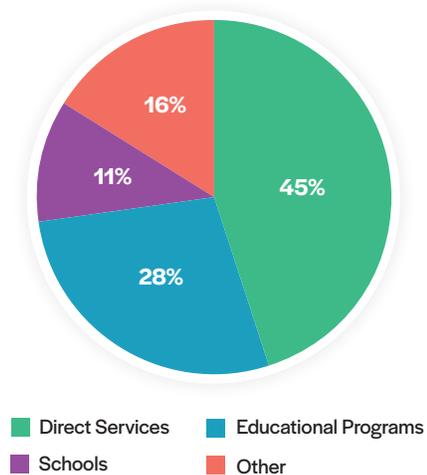
The plurality of leased schools (55) are leased by direct service nonprofits, and some function as community or health centers, offering a range of programs including mental health and addiction psychological services, transitional housing, and services for seniors and people with disabilities. Out of all 123 contracts for school buildings from 2014 to 2019, 20 contracts (16%) composed of both sales (10) and leases (10) were expressly for private development in real estate, commercial development, or other purposes like “research.”

To measure the implementation rate of the above-mentioned contracts, an additional sub-sample of 50 of the 123 schools with sale, transfer, or lease contracts was selected for in-person site visits. Site visits revealed that less than half (22 or 44%) of sold, transferred, or leased schools were actually in reuse, with 21 (42%) of the properties still vacant. For 7 (14%) of schools visited, researchers were unable to determine if the school was in use or not. Of vacant schools under contract, 10 (42%) suffered at least some degree of decay, such as vandalism (60%), illegal landfills (60%), and the accumulation of construction waste (40%) being among the most common characteristics.

**FIGURE 10**

## Current Use of Re-purposed Schools

Out of 123 contracts for building reuse, the plurality offer direct services (55) while 14 have become charter or private schools



**Source:** Public Registry of Government Contracts 2014–2019, Puerto Rico. “Direct Services” include senior, housing, health, and addiction-related services; “Educational Programs” include art, music, and after-school programs; and “Other” includes commercial real estate development, municipal use, and unknown.



The Dr. Martin Grove Brumbaugh school grounds, where garbage, debris, and broken furniture has accumulated. The school was sold to a firm with ties to real estate development.



Though nonprofit and community groups are technically allowed to compete side-by-side with for-profit and commercial entities for sale and lease contracts, the process to access a government contract can be bureaucratic and challenging for smaller community groups. One community leader who was able to facilitate a lease contract complained of the lengthy government processes, the lack of consistent regulations or guidelines, and increased pressure from the government to purchase at market rate instead of leasing.



**FROM TOP** CRH staff conducting field work in front of Dr. Martin Grove Brumbaugh school at San Juan. The school was sold to Shinrai Holdings in April 2019 to a company formed one year prior, though today it sits vacant and unused.

The Patria Pérez school in Yauco is now a church.

## 5. Schools Are a Window into Broader Issues

**THE OVERARCHING REASONS** for closing the schools commonly cited by the DE, governor, and others have been the territory’s falling population and public debt. Others, including parents and advocates interviewed for this research, see the closures as part of shifting resources to charter and private schools. In practice, local leaders and parents have never seen any formal criteria or transparent process for deciding which schools to close.

### Migration of Families

While significant numbers of Puerto Rican families have moved away over the last decade or more, it is unclear that the closed schools were limited to those that were no longer needed. The number of students in the public schools had already been falling by about 20,000 per year for ten years, to a total of just over 346,000 students, when Hurricanes Irma and Maria hit in 2017.<sup>59</sup> This is reflective of an ongoing loss in the total population on the territory, which has decreased by at least 14% since 2010.<sup>60</sup> The damage caused by the 2017 hurricanes only intensified the outward migration. The Puerto Rico DE closed at least 150 schools between 2010 and 2015, 165 in 2017, and another 263 in 2018.<sup>61</sup> While the population is falling, it is unclear it necessitated the accelerated and massive closing of 673 schools since 2007.

Furthermore, population decline is not an inevitable phenomenon in Puerto Rico. In fact, population decline in the territory is deeply tied to, and a consequence of, policy of the US federal government and the Puerto Rico Commonwealth.<sup>62</sup> Simply put, population decline is a symptom of a policy problem—not the problem itself. Creating policy that is designed for population decline—like closing schools—can

only deepen the negative consequences of the decline. Ultimately, community leaders and parents doubt the consolidation of schools has resulted in better quality schools, and parents, students, and teachers are left scrambling to readjust.

### Public Debt

Puerto Rico’s debt stands at approximately \$74 billion. This figure has been held up to reinforce the mainstream messaging that frames Puerto Rico’s fiscal situation as a “crisis” and inspires popular support for stabilizing and decreasing its debt load. The large amount of debt becomes the rationale for antidemocratic restructuring processes and escalating austerity, which are said to provide “solutions” to “unsustainable debts.” As was the case of Detroit, a US city whose large public debt has also been used repeatedly to justify “debt-reducing” policies, the amount of debt being publicized is often an inaccurate representation of the obligations owed. Ultimately, this contributes to the perception that the root of the debt problem is government mismanagement, corruption, and incompetence.

In the case of Puerto Rico, calculating the debt is complicated because municipalities—similar to US local governments—generate their own revenue and expenses, can issue their own bonds, and have different degrees of fiscal stability. This is not to say that the debt across the Commonwealth government, its public corporations, and its local governments is sustainable. However, Puerto Rico’s current debt situation should not be considered an isolated problem.

To understand Puerto Rico’s debt, it is necessary to account for the Commonwealth’s relationship to the mainland US and its historical context. Its status as a colonial entity and its treatment as such by financial

entities with ties to the federal government throughout the twentieth century have given top priority to financial interests, often over the needs and well-being of Puerto Ricans.<sup>63</sup> Various measures to subsidize corporate investments, like the triple tax exemption bond, created favorable conditions for manufacturing, pharmaceutical, and other industries from the mainland without similar support or investment in the welfare of, and opportunity for, Puerto Ricans.<sup>64</sup>

As these deals and exemptions were phased out, much of these industries left Puerto Rico. The lack of direct investment in the domestic population persisted, and the Commonwealth's government was forced to take on higher levels of debt to support vital public infrastructure and safety net programs. Wall Street, sensing an opportunity, campaigned hard for Puerto Rico to take on ever higher levels of debt.<sup>65</sup> When this debt reached a level of instability, the US federal government enacted the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act, or PROMESA, in 2016, which instituted the Financial Oversight and Management Board to manage the debt restructuring. The process of drafting PROMESA and selecting board members was heavily influenced by lobbying to make sure investors were prioritized in the process. As austerity was imposed on Puerto Rico to ensure that public funds were available to make payments to investors, Wall Street released optimistic projections about Puerto Rico's fiscal health, even as a group of twenty-six economists warned of the long-term harm such measures would have on Puerto Rico's macroeconomic growth.<sup>66</sup> Tellingly, the US federal government has ensured that its economic fate is disentangled from the Commonwealth through measures like maintaining separate unemployment rates, not tallying Puerto Rico's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and treating the archipelago as a foreign entity in the tax code.<sup>67</sup> Studying the details of Puerto Rico's political position relative to the US in tandem with its commercial and nonprofit productivity reveals multiple possible intervention strategies that run counter to current dominant strategies.<sup>68</sup>

Austerity measures taken in recent years have exacted a toll on all Puerto Ricans, negatively impacting the provision of essential public services in health care,

education, and social security. They have included tax increases, salary freezes, eliminating and eroding collective bargaining agreements, and drastic reductions in public employment. This has accelerated emigration, reduced tax revenues, and increased unemployment—all of which deepen the economic crisis. However, this does demonstrate that Puerto Rico has already taken the measures that the Financial Oversight and Management Board and other consultants have proposed at this moment. These measures have not improved the lived realities of its residents.

This has meant that the Puerto Rican government's obligations to its people are being made secondary to its obligations on the debt flowing to investors. Financial decisions like these determine residents' access to clean drinking water, health services, clean classrooms and cafeterias, libraries and internet service, and many more aspects of daily life. Funding for education is among the most significant government expenses, and when school funding is made subject to austerity measures, it opens the door for the system to be privatized.

As mentioned in the section Sales and Leasing of Closed Schools, only 10 (1%) of closed schools have been sold, according to publicly available contracts for schools from 2014 to 2019. The total sales revenue from 2014 to 2019 is \$4.1 million, with an additional \$191,562 in leases at market rate. Out of the 123 contracts from 2014 to 2019, 80% are for leases with the symbolic amount of \$1, evidence of the limited revenue source that reused schools offer. It is clear that revenue from sales or leases of reused schools do not make a significant dent in Puerto Rico's multibillion dollar debt.

By April 2018, the official statements by the Commonwealth government about the fiscal rationale for school closures changed, as it acknowledged that savings were minimal. Nevertheless, the government continued to support the closing of schools as a matter of efficiency.<sup>69</sup> In 2019, the unelected Financial Oversight and Management Board, tasked with managing the territory's debt crisis, announced it would not execute the plan to close an additional 300 schools in the coming year because, in fact, the closures had not achieved the expected cost

savings.<sup>70</sup> Our research into contracts has demonstrated a significant number of for-profit firms participating in school sales, many of which have holdings in other areas of real estate. Former secretary of education Julia Keleher is also currently facing federal charges in part for the granting of school property to a private developer for \$1 in exchange for an apartment in a high-cost condominium.<sup>71</sup>

A handful of schools were recipients of public funding for renovations, infrastructure improvements, and new recreation facilities shortly before their closing. Some abandoned schools still have signs on them announcing public investment or its adoption by a particular agency. In said cases, austerity measures have proven to lead to the loss of previous investments. Similarly, one audit of 84 closed schools in the Humacao region demonstrated that electric and water connections had not been cut, even after a year, resulting in \$167,747 in losses, between August 2017 and September 2018.<sup>72</sup>

School closures produce few savings and are an insignificant source of revenue for Puerto Rico. While they do not provide significant revenue, school closures do generate substantial and cascading costs that disadvantage the health, democratic participation, and well-being of students, families, neighborhoods, and the archipelago as a whole.

## Privatization of the Education System

By many accounts, Puerto Rico's public schools were not excelling before the closures due to the history of disinvestment. One community leader stated plainly, "everyone who can afford it sends their kids to private schools." Educators and parents alike fear that one of the hidden reasons for the closures is to facilitate a transition to a system that privatizes education, much like what has transpired in mainland US cities with high rates of school closures.<sup>73</sup> In 2018, just six months after the hurricanes, former Governor Roselló adopted a law allowing for charters as well as vouchers for private schools.<sup>74</sup> The 2018 Educational Reform Act, which created a school voucher system so that vouchers can be used for intradistrict

public school choice or private schools, allowed for the creation of charter schools and included a salary increase for teachers.<sup>75</sup> Months later, Frank Brogan, US Assistant Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education, praised Puerto Rico for paving the way for charter schools.<sup>76</sup> Some local leaders suspect that the school closures accomplish a consolidation of students into larger schools that will be more profitable for future private and charter school companies.

These concerns are warranted. Of the 113 school buildings that were leased from 2014 to 2019, 14 are now private or for-profit schools, and over one-third of these new schools (five) are now Christian academies. For example, José Andino y Amezcuita school in Bayamón was closed at the end of the 2017 school year. In December 2017, it was leased to High Achievement Christian School, a for-profit limited liability company, for \$1 per month to run a Christian school (prekindergarten through high school) on the site. This conversion, along with the other 13 formerly public now private schools, evidence the privatization of the public education system. Schools are contracted to other entities, including Christian or religious institutions, to operate and run private schools. Because these new schools are not public, they can have selective enrollment and further exacerbate educational inequities and social inequalities in Puerto Rico.

School privatization—also referred to as "market-based education reform"—is often depicted as the optimal solution for improving "struggling" school districts as well as a civil rights action, providing people of color and marginalized communities access to the promises of the free market.<sup>77</sup> As the ground is laid for the privatization of the school system in Puerto Rico, with austerity and debt obligations used as pretext, it is important to understand the ways in which market-based reform is not as promising as many prominent claims make it out to be.

Privatization reform is generally described as bringing market principles to a bureaucratic and inflexible system.<sup>78</sup> The argument is that free choice is necessary to bring competition and efficiency to education where the public sector has allowed schools to fail because of unresponsive operations and overreaching teachers'

unions. However, this framing ignores the histories and current realities of race- and class-based structural disadvantages. Instead of confronting these structural issues and putting resources into uprooting them, the market reform proposal ignores these realities in its enthusiasm for free market solutions. This approach further entrenches inequities as it intensively favors those who have access to greater financial resources. Because these dynamics are ignored, schools that are struggling because of structural reasons will be thought of as failing to compete in the market. Much like with the 2002 No Child Left Behind Act, high-performing schools will be rewarded through additional funding (supposedly to encourage competition), and the structurally disadvantaged schools will fall further behind. This is especially the case as curriculums are stripped to focus on test

scores, and extracurricular programs are eliminated to reduce costs.<sup>79</sup>

While market-based reform is presented as beneficial to students in “failing” public systems, many of the organizations that operate charter schools are for-profit companies, which means they need to find a way to have a profitable revenue stream. As many of these schools receive funding based on standardized test performance, a lot of schools will find ways to exclude students that they think may drag test scores down, as opposed to dedicating resources to helping all children reach their maximum potential and flourish academically.<sup>80</sup> Many of the people who run the organizations that operate charters are politically connected and win contracts based on those connections.<sup>81</sup> Clear evidence of this practice exists in Puerto Rico with another set of corruption charges against former secretary of education Julia Keleher; in 2019, she was arrested for her role in a fraud and money laundering scheme where she inappropriately funneled contracts to people with whom she had personal connections.<sup>82</sup> In these ways, the private for-profit interests benefit financially on the backs of students who deserve a robust and fair educational experience.



**LEFT** The Luis T. Baliñas school in Aguas Buenas, shortly after its closing.

**BELOW** After closing, the Luis T. Baliñas school of Aguas Buenas, now demolished, has been sold to private developers.



## 6. Conclusion and Recommendations

### Conclusion

Public schools, particularly in Puerto Rico, are bedrocks for the communities they serve. They provide a place for intergenerational learning, access to food, social networks, a place for voting, shelter during extreme weather, and other essential functions that go beyond being solely a place of education for students. Public education itself also creates public benefits, which are enjoyed by many more people than the person directly receiving the education.<sup>83</sup> But when education is thought of as a market commodity, it is treated as an individual private product detached from these essential benefits. Additionally, when slots in charter schools are limited and private schools have selective enrollment, families are put in competition with one another, despite the fact that education is a constitutional right.

Consecutive waves of mass school closures in Puerto Rico have proven detrimental for students, parents, and whole communities. The alleged justifications and benefits of school closures has also been misleading and misinformed, given the lack of evidence that it has improved education or public finances. However, in the rare case that a school closure is needed or inevitable, there ought to be deep improvements to decision-making, communication, and collaborative planning to assure that risks and negative impacts to surrounding communities are understood and mitigated.

According to John B. King, former US secretary of education, the Puerto Rico educational system “has long suffered from a lack of investment, and the consequences of that lack of investment are lack of opportunity for students.” In this sense, the school closures and austerity policies can be seen as a continuation of, not a break from, the past.

Educational policy and the planned reuse of closed schools must be an integral part of responding to population loss, public debt, and a struggling education system. Solutions must begin with a framework that understands community schools as essential public assets that are anchors for community-driven local and regional equitable development. Building high-quality community-controlled schools should be placed at the center of long-term strategies to reduce poverty and increase resilience. Ultimately, investing in public schools must be seen as a way to reverse economic distress, bring families back to the archipelago, and support the development of young people into future leaders and professionals committed to advancing grounded solutions that can contribute to the prosperity of their communities.

The overall reduction in student populations can generate creative approaches, including creating public Montessori schools. For example, there are now 45 public Montessori schools serving 14,000 students in Puerto Rico, the largest and fastest growing public Montessori project in the US.<sup>84</sup> Although 14 public Montessori schools were listed to be closed by the DE, community advocacy by students and families managed to prevent every single planned closure. The “Puerto Rico Model,” as it’s become known, is a unique combination of the public access and governance of a public school with the program design and curriculum based on the Montessori approach.

Education is not the only area where community members are organizing and advancing bold visions that will transform public systems to resolve major problems. Puerto Rican leaders have developed plans to convert the territory’s energy system to 100 percent renewable,<sup>85</sup> resolve widespread property title issues without displacing residents,<sup>86</sup> and innovate

across sectors.<sup>87</sup> Rising to face large-scale challenges does not require that communities become collateral damage, and transformative solutions do not have to mean a transition away from the public sphere and a ceding of power to private interests.

The impact of the school closures is profoundly concerning, but the story is not over. Puerto Rico's struggles are an extreme version of challenges faced across the US and much of the world, with conditions in Puerto Rico mirroring many of the experiences of school districts in the mainland US. Like Puerto Rico, these mainland districts are mostly lower-income communities of color, racialized, and have had market-based reform imposed on them. The solutions and outcomes on the archipelago will provide lessons for the entire US.

## Recommendations

This research points to several actions that should be prioritized by the Commonwealth and the DE:

1. Cease closures and transfers of public schools until clear decision-making criteria and a public process are established and publicly disclosed to ensure an inclusive, responsive, and transparent process for planning and implementing closures.
2. In the future, closures of public schools should be determined through a process with:
  - a. criteria that account for the full range of social, economic, health, cultural, and other benefits to communities reflected in the information presented in this report; scholarly research; and multiple covenants related to international and human rights law, including the International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination and the Convention on the Rights of the Child;
  - b. a decision-making process that provides meaningful opportunities for participation and accountable implementation of public decisions for students, families, surrounding communities, and local government;
  - c. public access to timely, relevant information and data needed to make informed decisions related to the decision-making criteria and potential effects on surrounding communities;
3. Require a reuse plan for all closed schools, to be developed through a process involving local government and robust parent and community participation. This should include:
  - a. a funded and deliberate outreach campaign;
  - b. guarantees of public access to relevant information;
  - c. coordination and provision of social services for families harmed by closures;
  - d. preferences for public and community uses;
  - e. claw back clauses in case of breach of contract;
  - f. postclosing maintenance plans; and
  - g. technical assistance for interested public, community, and nonprofit entities.
4. Commission an independent audit of the DE and related agencies' activities regarding closures, consolidations, and contracts for reuse, in order to identify true savings or losses resulting from school closures. This audit should include debts related to the provision of educational services and educational infrastructure, including the Department of Energy (DOE) and the Public Buildings Authority, and include, but not be limited to, Puerto Rico's public primary and secondary school system. Additionally, the costs of the cascading effects of school closures must be considered, includ-

ing costs associated with community blight and decreased local economic development.

5. Provide public access to accurate, timely, relevant data on school closures, leases and sales, financial records, and decision-making processes. Various gaps in available data limited this study, from a lack of official lists of school closures by year, to population decline by region surrounding a school, to zoning changes surrounding schools. These and other datasets are essential to effective planning and policy. Additionally, the role of consultant firms advising the government, the Financial Oversight and Management Board, and the DOE has become an important area for public concern. Information about private firms and contractors brought in to conduct financial feasibility studies, cost benefit analysis, restructuring plans for the public education system, and other related services should be made readily available. This includes contracts with those entities and any and all deliverables related to those contracts and consultations.
6. Decisions regarding the closing of schools should be off-limits to the Financial Oversight and Management Board. Though the board and Commonwealth often point fingers at each other about who is to blame for school closings,<sup>88</sup> decision-making on closures should be in the exclusive control of the Commonwealth and local communities served by those schools.
7. Conduct a thorough assessment of the current physical condition of all public schools (closed or not) in Puerto Rico, allowing the DE to better inventory its assets and provide for more informed rehabilitation, relocation, and reuse plans for closed schools. These plans should assess and consider.

## Areas for Further Inquiry

Several areas merit further analysis to better understand the impact of, and effective responses to, school closures in Puerto Rico:

- Research the potential correlation between closing schools and displacement of low- and middle-income rural and urban populations and communities.
- Analyze Puerto Rico's racial segregation and inequality and evaluate its possible relationship with school closings.
- Conduct community-based research to identify specific subpopulations of students and community members to understand their particular experiences with the school closures and appropriate changes to policy and practice. For example, the researchers found that youth in custody of the state have been uniquely affected by school closures. This is one type of student population that is uniquely situated within the education system in Puerto Rico.
- Create guidelines, programs, and/or policies for future decision-making before, during, and after closures.
- Carry out a quantitative analysis to investigate patterns between the closed schools and receptor school. This research should evaluate the correlation between closures and the ostensible rationale of population loss and revenue shortfall. This is currently constrained due to lack of available data.
- Closely evaluate Puerto Rico's model for financing its public education within the current economic and political context, comparing it with models implemented in other jurisdictions. This inquiry should identify alternatives for the financing and investment in the development of the public education system.
- Design equitable strategies for struggling schools and communities responding to decreased student populations and economic downturns.
- Identify and support pilot projects and models showing best practices for community-led opposition to school closures and community-oriented reuse of public school buildings.

# Endnotes

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The Othering and Belonging Institute brings together researchers, community stakeholders, and policy-makers to identify and challenge the barriers to an inclusive, just, and sustainable society in order to create transformative change.

Centro para la Reconstrucción del Hábitat (“CRH”) is a non-profit dedicated to changing how vacant and abandoned properties are dealt with in order to leverage their conversion as assets for community-based and long-term transformation. CRH is the only organization promoting education, applied research, cross-sectoral collaboration, and public policy to tackle blight in Puerto Rico.

