



Congressman Pedro R. Pierluisi
Puerto Rico Education Summit: Investing in Our Future
Statement as Prepared for Delivery
“A New Day for Education in Puerto Rico”
October 17, 2011

Thank you, James, for that warm introduction. It is an honor for me to welcome you and Secretary Duncan to our beautiful Island and to be part of the Puerto Rico Education Summit.

It has been an exciting few months for Puerto Rico. In June, President Obama became the first sitting president to officially visit the Island in half a century. And today, we have the privilege of welcoming the U.S. Secretary of Education. It is clear that our Island is an integral part of this Administration’s vision for building a stronger and more prosperous America. Welcome, Mr. Secretary.

I would also like to welcome others who have traveled to Puerto Rico for the Summit. I especially want to thank Jaime Aquino of the Los Angeles Unified School District for joining us today. Jaime, I commend you for the work you have done in urban school districts across the United States. I am particularly impressed by the results you have achieved with English language learners, who are a critical student population in Puerto Rico and in many school districts across our nation. Thank you for joining us, Jaime.

Today is a new day for education in Puerto Rico. For over a decade, the Puerto Rico Department of Education has faced systemic problems managing federal funds. But with the steadfast support of Secretary Duncan and his team in Washington, the Puerto Rico government has made significant progress in how it administers these funds. Earlier this year, the U.S. Department of Education announced that Puerto Rico had come into compliance with an Agreement the parties had reached in 2007. This is no small feat. Indeed, it is an accomplishment that all who work at PRDE should be proud of.

While much progress has been made, more work needs to be done. We must implement rigorous curricula in all schools and classrooms so that all children are held to high standards. We must give teachers more time and support to engage in professional learning. And we must improve the delivery of special education services, so that all students are given the chance to succeed.

My passion about the need to reform our educational system is rooted in my recognition that Puerto Rico and its people have tremendous potential. As commerce becomes increasingly globalized, Puerto Rico’s location at the intersection of the United States, the Caribbean, and Latin America will present our Island with countless opportunities. But our people must have the knowledge and skills needed to take advantage of these opportunities.

A critical challenge that our Island faces in preparing students to participate in the global economy is to improve the quantity and quality of English language instruction in our schools. Our goal should not be that English replace Spanish, but rather that our students receive high quality instruction in both languages.

In today's world, mastery of English can open so many doors for our Island's youth. A worker who is fluent in both Spanish and English can conduct business just as easily with a person located in Central and South America as one who is located in the states, whereas a worker who knows only one language is largely limited to working with people who speak that language.

Because of the important roles that Spanish and English play in the personal and professional lives of our people, Puerto Rico is uniquely positioned to be a national leader in the development of bilingual education programs. Our schools can serve as laboratories for dual language programs and other bilingual programs being used to address the needs of English language learners across the U.S.

But developing new bilingual programs takes time. To address our immediate needs, we should give our teachers the opportunity to participate in exchanges with other school districts in the U.S. Through an exchange, teachers in Puerto Rico would strengthen their English language skills by spending a year in a native English-speaking state, while providing a school district in the U.S. mainland with a fluent Spanish teacher who could instruct English language learners in their native tongue. And Puerto Rico's students would benefit from an exchange by having the opportunity to be taught for a year by a native English-speaking teacher from the states.

I hope today's Summit highlights those programs and curricula that have worked in school districts across our nation, so that we can implement them in a way that will work for our Island's students. Thank you all for joining us today and helping to move Puerto Rico's education system forward.