

Health and Education: Puerto Rico's progress and pitfalls

The economy, the swine flu, the Education Department and now the University of Puerto Rico -specifically the Río Piedras campus- have been at the center of our local news coverage. Given the huge amount of fanfare surrounding these controversies, many of us may wonder why, in this extremely competitive environment, we can't concentrate our efforts to develop a safe, healthy and exciting educational experience for our children. By developing a second-to-none educational system, we will also enhance our competitiveness. Who knows how many new Google's can be started by Puerto Ricans educated on the Island? Not many if we don't change our current structure; and change is something that has been a constant in our society. A look at what some of the challenges faced and overcome by members of previous generations, should offer some insight and hope that our current challenges can be overcome.

Around seventy years ago, in 1942 to be exact, of the 711,000 children ages 5 to 19 living in Puerto Rico, only 41 percent were enrolled in public schools. The illiteracy rate (people who could not read or write) was 31 percent. In other words, almost one third of the population, which numbered around two million at the time, could neither read nor write. The enrollment at the University of Puerto Rico was 5,720 students, a far cry from the 70,000 students who are currently enrolled. About forty per cent of the people under 19 years of age spoke English, yet only about twenty percent of those from 20 to 54 could speak it, and practically no one over that age. The yearly cost of instruction in the public school system was \$28.97, of which \$24.36 was paid by the Federal Government and the rest by the local authorities.

Schooling requires healthy students, and Puerto Rico's limited resources did not provide an infrastructure to adequately safeguard its population. There were only 523 physicians to take care of the entire population. The highest cause of death was the result of diarrhea and enteritis, followed by tuberculosis, diseases of the heart, and malaria. If diarrhea and enteritis had not been eradicated, given our current population, 12,500 people would be afflicted and die of this condition. However, in interpreting data from the 1940's, it is important to note that a high proportion of these deaths occurred without the deceased receiving previous medical



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attention. The doctor usually filled out the death certificate after death had occurred. Not knowing the real cause of death, they may have stated the cause from the description of the symptoms given by relatives. This data, therefore, tends to be somewhat unreliable by today's standards. It is interesting to note, however, that in the United States, deaths by diarrhea and enteritis were almost nonexistent, and deaths from tuberculosis were 80 percent lower than in Puerto Rico.

In the seventy years hence, the Island has overcome many if not all of these challenges. Yet, this new century offers newer challenges for which we have proven to be ill equipped, as neither our educational system nor our health administration provide competitive services. Why, for example, are not the universities in Puerto Rico (both public and private) ranked along with the stateside counterparts in the gold standard U.S. News and Worlds Report? Why do we limit our choices for president of the University of Puerto Rico to locals, which though they may have been very competent in their field, have never administered a college or university, much less one with 70,000 students? When the president of Georgia Tech resigned recently to accept an offer from Washington's Smithsonian Institution, Georgia Tech interviewed administrators from all over the nation, before finally offering the position to the then current president of Texas A&M. Why can't we also look for the most talented administrator, where ever he/she may reside?



La Perla circa 1950s

Fundación Luis Muñoz Marín

The Department of Education also requires an established and well compensated administrator; after all, its budget is in the billions of dollars. In addition, if we add the number of students, faculty and staff, we will realize that more people are employed in the Department of Education, than in the entire manufacturing sector of the economy. However, manufacturing plants have an array of talented engineers responsible for adequately safeguarding quality, productivity, logistics, and infrastructure, health and safety concerns. There are, of course, other professionals, such as those in human resources who are essential in order to efficiently run the operation. Does the Education Department have a similar infrastructure? It certainly does not, in spite of the fact that this talent is readily available on the Island.

Puerto Rico has demonstrated time and time again that it can rise to the challenges it faces. History is proof of that. Will it repeat its previous performance? Let's hope it can.

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VOICES

Have regard for Justice Sotomayor's position

Supreme Court Associate Justice Sonia Sotomayor has made all Puertoricans proud and happy. We're all very glad. And that has to be where it stops!

Judge Sotomayor is not an advocate for Puerto Ricans nor Hispanics in general before the Supreme Court. Neither is she a feminist poster woman. She is not a Hispanic spokesperson nor does she represent us Puerto Ricans in any way. She is not "Our Judge." We must all respect that reality and avoid ever trying to place her in a delicate position, even if done out of enthusiastic pride and admiration.

She will be judging cases brought before the U.S. Supreme Court based solely on the evidence, the applicable jurisprudence and laws, the U.S. Constitution and, above all, her knowledge and experience in their interpretation. Period. Whichever personal opinions or biases she may have previously held do not enter into her decision-making; she will leave them at home each time she makes her way to the Supreme Court to decide on cases.

Hers is a lonely and difficult position. We must never make it harder for her in any way and always recall that even the best of intentions cannot excuse imprudent behavior.

Let us all again wish Justice Sonia Sotomayor success.

*J. Raymond Watson
rom Guaynabo City on August 21*

'Pay to play'

To the Editor:

Senate President Thomas Rivera Schatz used public funds for a glossy propaganda pamphlet about his tenure as Senate president. He refuses to tell the public how much of their money he used for this nonsense. Recently, he got 800 to 1,000 people to cough up \$500 each for his birthday party. This is the classic example of "pay to play" politics. You and I know that these people are not his friends, but rather are people who do not want to antagonize the Senate present NPP leader and potential governor of Puerto Rico. These same people will be calling upon Rivera Schatz for various favors over the coming years, so \$500 is just a first payment on what they will be required to contribute in the future.

The current governor, being a very nice and meek sort of leader, had only mild words of reprimand for the Senate (not the Senate leader), asking only that they be prudent in spending the public's funds. If the roles were reversed, you can bet that Rivera Schatz would have convened an investigative panel on this matter. If you think Venezuela's Hugo Chávez and Cuba's Fidel Castro are examples of Latin American dictators, I want to introduce you to Puerto Rico's dictator-in-waiting. Get a copy of the costly, glossy pamphlet and you will see the face of the future dictator. If you doubt me, just ask those reporters on the story what he told them — "It is none of your business what I spent, and it is none of the public's business on what I spend, so get lost. The people of Puerto Rico elected me to spend their money and I am

doing just that." We will see how good Puerto Rico's reporters are as they seek to find out how Rivera Schatz is spending public funds and how much he spent on his propaganda piece.

*J. D. Aragon
from Old San Juan on August 21*

Sinking into tyranny

To Governor Fortuño:

Stats tell us cons on probation and parole commit plenty of crimes. Not so with defendants out on bail.

What you want is to circumvent the constitutional requirement that an accused be presumed innocent until found guilty beyond a reasonable doubt. Your bully cops pick him up and he gets indicted and rots in jail for a stretch — a long one you'll make sure — whether he did it or not.

You don't like democracy.

*Marta García
from Ocean Park on August 21*

Police brutality, yes again

In the '60s police routinely stormed Río Piedras and roughed up and shot people. We were protesting the Vietnam slaughter and they were, well, having fun. Last night they did it again. For old time's sake surely.

Joaquín Serrano from Condado on August 21

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