

THE ALLIANCE TO RECLAIM OUR SCHOOLS

March 6, 2018

To Members of the Legislative Assembly of Puerto Rico,

In the aftermath of a tragedy, it is tempting to grasp the hand that reaches out and promises to pull you through. In some cases, though, that hand may be pulling you in to a swamp.

The Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools (AROS) encourages you to reject SB 825 and HB 14441, which would allow the establishment of charter schools in Puerto Rico. We believe that opening up public schools to external corporate control is the *wrong* way to go for the future of Puerto Rico. In this moment especially, as families and educators continue to migrate to the mainland, it is critical to sustain and strengthen your public schools and ensure that they are democratically accountable to the communities that they serve, rather than to raise the specter of dramatic change and the instability that charter schools bring with them. You need to invest in, and strengthen your public schools, not invite more disruption.

The national organizations that comprise AROS represent 7 million parents, educators, students and community members across the U.S., many of whom have experienced the realities of corporate charter schools in large and small districts, both urban and rural. Before you vote to bring charters to Puerto Rico, we offer the following lessons, grounded in both research and personal experience:

- **CHARTER SCHOOLS DO NOT IMPROVE ACADEMIC OUTCOMES.** While some charter schools offer genuinely innovative educational strategies, *most* do not. Most charter schools utilize a largely traditional educational model and see largely similar educational outcomes as traditional public schools. If you are being told that charters improve student academic outcomes, you are being sold a bill of goods.

Real education reform engages and respects students, educators and communities and addresses their individual needs. Franchise schools—which is exactly what corporate charters are—fail to do so.

- **CHARTER SCHOOLS ATTRACT BAD APPLES.** Freed from regulation, as they are in the bills being debated in Puerto Rico, charter schools attract their share of vultures looking to make a buck. The bills you have before you are vague, at best, on issues such as authorization, oversight and regulation. Education Secretary Julia Keleher has said that she'd like to keep it that way.

The failure of these bills to address issues of transparency and accountability will open the door even further to the education profiteers. Even when these issues *are* addressed in charter laws, hundreds of cases of fraud, waste and abuse have been [recorded](#) in charter schools across the states:

- A charter school in Washington, D.C. was shut down when senior staff members at the school were caught diverting \$3 million in tax dollars to themselves and to two for-profit companies they had created to provide services to the charter school. Just two years later, a second charter school founder in DC was arrested in a similar scheme, paying himself more than \$1 million per year to run the school through a management company he had founded;
- A Pennsylvania charter school's founder and board president were sentenced to over 2 years in prison for diverting public funds from the school to a restaurant and private school they also owned;
- A Louisiana charter school's business manager diverted \$660,000 in school funds to herself, to support a gambling habit.

These examples are not anomalies. Hundreds of such schemes have been uncovered over the past decade. Before you vote to bring charters to Puerto Rico, know what you are exposing your public dollars to.

- ***YOUR PUBLIC DOLLARS WILL BE ON THE NEXT FLIGHT OUT OF SAN JUAN.*** Opening up Puerto Rico to the education marketplace will attract corporate management organizations from the mainland, seeking new markets for their wares. But much of the benefits will leave the island in the form of management fees. Your already strained public tax dollars will end up in New York, Grand Rapids, Houston and elsewhere—not in your classrooms.
- ***INEQUALITY WILL INCREASE.*** When it comes to equity, you are inviting a bulldozer onto the level playing field you endeavor to create among schools on the island. Charter schools do not serve all students. In their zeal to show academic superiority and save costs, many charters erect [barriers to enrollment](#), [push children out](#) and to [fail to provide services](#) for students with disabilities. These practices results in greater disparities between schools. They increase segregation (economic, racial, and social) and burden traditional public schools with higher proportions of students with the greatest needs, while stripping those same schools of the resources necessary to provide for those students. This is an especially serious concern in Puerto Rico, where schools educate (and are required to serve) twice as many special needs students as schools on the mainland.

Recent [reports](#) have indicated that Education Secretary Betsy DeVos has been urging Puerto Rico down the path of privatization. Parents, students and teachers from her home state of Michigan can attest to the devastation that Hurricane Betsy has wrought over the past two decades. DeVos helped to bankroll a charter industry in Michigan that is dominated by for-profit corporate entities that have utterly failed the state's students and bankrupted the state's traditional public school system. Both the [New York Times](#) and the [Detroit Free Press](#) have documented the chaos created by corporate greed and ideological devotion to the private sector. Michigan students have been the losers in DeVos's free market education experiment. Now she wants to bring that experiment to Puerto Rico.

The DeVos agenda for public education is the wrong agenda for Puerto Rico. Having seen decades of Puerto Rico's own wealth and resources siphoned away by corporations, banks and hedge-funds bent on making a buck off of the island, the last thing the Legislative Assembly should be doing right now is handing your schools to these same interests. Communities in Puerto Rico have expressed the commitment to own their schools.

If there is an opportunity presented by Maria, it is the opportunity to reinvest in communities, in parents and students, in educators. Charter schools offer a false promise. Don't fall for it.

Sincerely,

Keron Blair and Jay Travis, co-directors
The Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools

ALLIANCE NATIONAL PARTNERS

Advancement Project, National Office

Alliance for Educational Justice

American Federation of Teachers

Center for Popular Democracy

Gamaliel

Journey for Justice Alliance

National Education Association

Schott Foundation for Public Education

Service Employees International Union

ADDITIONAL SIGNERS

Action Center on Race and the Economy
AFC+A (Americas for Conservation + the Arts)
Alianza por Puerto Rico-Massachusetts
Alliance for Quality Education
AROS Colorado
AROS Louisville
AROS Shelby County (Tennessee)
Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance
Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance, AFL-CIO (APALA)
Boston Education Justice Alliance
Chicago Teachers Union
Cincinnati Educational Justice Coalition
Citizen Action of NY
Citizens for Public Schools (Massachusetts)
Coalition Advocating for Public Education (CAPE) of Middle Tennessee
Colorado Education Association
Colorado Jobs With Justice
CT Puerto Rican Agenda

CT Working Families
Education Rights Network
Families for Racial Justice Chicago
Grassroots Collaborative, Illinois
Hedge Clippers
Jefferson County Teachers Association (Kentucky)
Jobs with Justice, Kentucky Chapter
Labor Council for Latin American Advancement
LCLAA NYC
League of United Latin American Citizens
Make the Road CT
Make the Road NJ
Make the Road, NY
MANA, a National Latina Organization
Massachusetts Education Justice Alliance
Massachusetts Jobs with Justice
Mi Familia Vota
NAME Illinois
National Association for Bilingual Education
National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health
National Migrant and Seasonal Head Start Association
National Organization for Women
NYC Coalition for Education Justice (CEJ)
NYCC
One Pennsylvania
Opportunity Action
Organize Florida
Parents Unified for Local School Education (PULSENJ)
PHENOM (Public Higher Education Network of Massachusetts)
Racine Educators United (REA-REAA)
Reclaim Our Schools Los Angeles (ROSLA)
ReFund America Project
Schools and Communities United, Milwaukee
SEIU Local 32BJ
Step Up Louisiana
Strong for All
Tennessee Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools
Tennessee Public Education Coalition
The Peoria People's Project
United States Hispanic Leadership Institute
United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA)
Vamos4PR
Voto Latino