

Puerto Rico recognizes Montessori

Public Montessori in Puerto Rico takes a bold step



BY **DAVID AYER**

Puerto Rico is home to the greatest concentration of public Montessori schools in the United States.

Yes, you read every word of that sentence correctly. As previously reported in *MontessoriPublic*, Puerto Rico packs 45 public Montessori schools into an island the size and population of Connecticut and an economy on par with Alabama. And yes, Puerto Rico is part of the United States.

Since Hurricane Maria devastated the island in 2017, the Puerto Rican education system, and Montessori's special place there, has been in turmoil and disarray, along with many basic civic structures on the island.

Restructuring Puerto Rico's public education system in the wake of Maria is the special purview of Secretary of Education Julie Keleher, a Philadelphia native with a background in project management for a Delaware school district, the U.S. Department of Education, and private clients. She was appointed to the Puerto Rico position in 2016 by the current Governor, Ricardo Rosselló, with a mandate to re-organize, streamline, and improve the island's heavily bureaucratic and poorly performing education system.

Keleher was a polarizing figure from the outset. Some saw her mainland background as a strength, allowing her to sidestep partisan conflicts and entrenched interests that have paralyzed



Rosibel Recondo connects with public Montessori students in Puerto Rico

previous reform efforts, while others viewed her as a “white savior” figure brought in from Washington and reinforcing decades of colonial influence. For some, her administrative and project management chops are just what is needed to cut through the tangle of inefficiencies and patronage holding the system back, while to others she is a heartless technocrat ruthlessly cutting costs and closing schools without any understanding of local conditions and the effects on people's lives. And many suspect an ulterior motive of privatizing the island's educational system.

Hurricane Maria's impact in September 2017 presented both a challenge and an opportunity for school reform. Hundreds of schools were damaged or destroyed (along with countless homes and businesses), roads were washed out, and of course the entire island was without power for weeks. Comparisons to the “charterization” of the New Orleans school system after Katrina were

inevitable, and Keleher herself called the aftermath “an opportunity to press the reset button.”

Perhaps the most controversial move has been school closures. Keleher had closed 167 schools before Maria, and last summer the department announced the closure of another 265 (down from 305 initially), bringing the island's total down to 847, a 25% cut. Puerto Rico's student population has been declining for years, and Keleher cites the inefficiency of small schools in remote areas serving fewer than 50 children, as well as daunting repair costs, but it's easy to see the impact on families and communities when a core institution is shuttered.

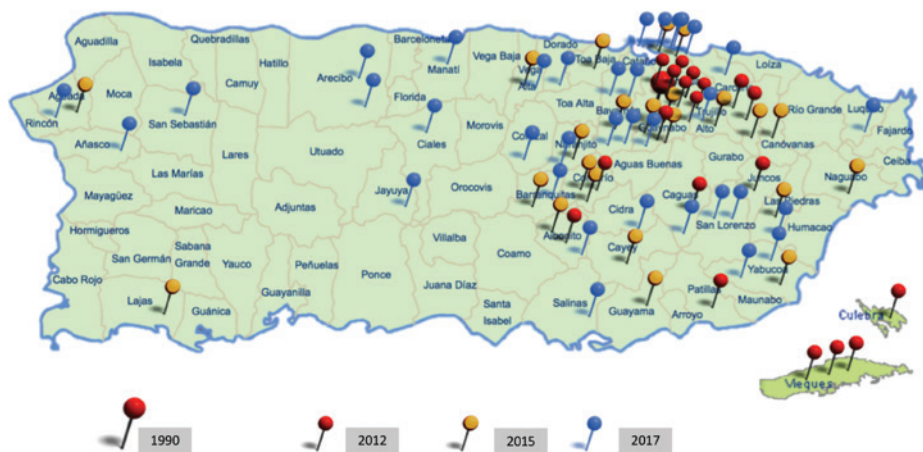
So where does this leave Montessori? In December, I spoke again with Ana Maria Garcia, Executive Director of the Instituto Nueva Escuela (INE), a nonprofit which trains teachers and

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supports public Montessori in Puerto Rico. Garcia has been, and continues to be, the driving force behind public Montessori here for decades.

Garcia doesn't disagree that the system is overly centralized and in need of reform, and applauds Keleher's move to bring decisions closer to the schools and the people who work there. But she is wary of the strict dollars-and-cents approach and the sense that reform decisions need to be made quickly, by the department, with little public input.

Although fifteen Montessori schools were at first slated for closure, in the end, after protests and collective action, they all remained open. According to Garcia, this is due to the deep community participation which characterizes the Montessori community and INE itself. Parents, teachers, and supporters mobilized a campaign to advocate for the successful programs. Keleher proposed transforming the popular Montessori schools into charters, but the idea was strongly rejected by the community. (This stands in contrast to public Montessori stateside, where 40% of such schools are organized as charters, for the autonomy and independence the model affords.)



Public Montessori schools in Puerto Rico

Montessori programs out from under the academic oversight department and allowed them the autonomy to implement Montessori curriculum and school structures (mixed ages, trained teachers, etc.).

In the fall of 2018, the position opened up as the former Secretary stepped down and Keleher moved to make a new appointment. There was initially a good deal of distrust in the selection process, and the Montessori community mobilized once again to advocate for their position. After what

as a principal shed some light on the education system Keleher and other are working to reform. "In a regular classroom, the teachers have to control the students." At times, classrooms were dominated by children "fighting, shouting, and not working." This isn't surprising in a system serving children traumatized by oppression, poverty, and violence in their communities, and one using more traditional, authoritarian educational methods.

Starting as a principal in 2006, Recondo knew she had to address the dysfunction in her classrooms and began to look at schools with more successful approaches. In the early 2000s, Garcia's work developing Montessori schools had begun to take off, and Recondo found her way the flagship program, Ponce de Leon in the barrio Juan Domingo, and had her "Montessori moment": "The classroom was organized, the teacher peaceful, not shouting or controlling, the students working quietly, with a lot of discipline, on things that were important to them." She knew she had to make a change.

She returned to her school and arranged to have her teachers trained, joining an AMS administrator's training in New York herself. Just as in Juan

"The Montessori teacher is very structured, so the classroom can dance the way it should dance."

The big story, however, is the permanent establishment of a Secretariat of Montessori Education and the appointment of a new leader there. In 2014, thanks to the work of INE, the Secretariat (a department) was established within the Department of Education by an executive order of the Governor, and the role of Secretary of Montessori Education was created and filled. This structure took the

Garcia said was "thousands of phone calls" from the community, a more consultative, participatory process was launched, and in the end Governor Rosselló appointed a trusted member of the community: Rosibel Recondo.

Ms. Recondo was (until this appointment) a Puerto Rican public Montessori school principal who started out as a conventional K-6 teacher. Her experiences in the classroom and later

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Domingo, she saw her school and her community transformed. One of the greatest changes, she said, has been the “mesa a la paz,” or peace table, where children can resolve problems without an adult. She has seen her teachers step back from control and grant independence to their students. “The Montessori teacher is very structured, so the classroom can dance the way it should dance.”

What’s next for Montessori in Puerto Rico? Even more important than filling the Secretariat position with a community leader is the fact that the department, formerly established by executive order, has been enshrined in legislation, and so cannot easily be undone by the next Governor (Rosselló’s term is up in 2021). Rosselló has also promised INE that the Montessori schools are safe from characterization. Garcia would like to see the department

expanded to include administrators for each age group (birth to three, three to six, etc.) and Recondo will be focusing on the working conditions and salaries of the adults—teachers in Puerto Rico make close to the median household income in a country with a poverty rate of 45% and a surprisingly high cost of living. The ultimate resolution of the territory’s \$74 billion debt crisis, which looms over the \$3-4 billion budget for the entire education system, will be an enormous political and economic transformation well beyond Rosselló’s, Garcia’s, or Keleher’s control. But you can be sure that the public Montessori community will continue to make its voice heard.

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