

How Eight State Education Agencies in the Northeast and Islands Region Identify and Support Low-Performing Schools and Districts

Puerto Rico



Provide intensive school improvement assistance to schools via trusted school improvement organizations that support each school community in developing its own vision and plans for success, by involving all constituencies, focusing on data-identified needs and literacy, and developing local leadership.

N.B. Data collection for this SEA took place between July 2007 and April 2008.

CONTEXT

Puerto Rico is organized politically as a commonwealth, with a unique governmental structure that is a hybrid between a state and an independent nation, politically negotiated and continually revisited. Its population of about 4 million is predominantly native Spanish speaking and somewhat diverse racially and ethnically. It is 80% White (mostly Spanish origin) and 8% Black, with 12% designated “other.” With its population density, the distinction between urban and rural becomes blurred, and all Puerto Rican school districts include both urban and rural schools.

The number of public school students has declined dramatically in recent years. The 2006–2007 student population of nearly 400,000 is a drop from 575,993 students in 2004–05, largely due to an increase in the number of students going to private schools coupled with a reduction in the school-age population (*El Nuevo Dia*, August 6, 2007; “Preferencia,” 2007). The loss of student population in the public schools is covered prominently in the local media and is of great concern to many educators. Public schools increasingly serve a predominantly poor/low-income population. Nearly all of Puerto Rico’s 1,500 schools are classified Title I; only 2–4% are not classified Title I (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006).

For all federal fiscal purposes, the Puerto Rico Department of Education (PRDE) is considered both the state education agency (SEA) and the island’s only local education agency (LEA). All “hire and fire” power rests with the PRDE, which is organized into 10 regions and 84 districts. Regional directors and district superintendents are appointed by the Secretary of Education. Regional directors are responsible for implementing the administrative policies and operations of the department for the districts and schools in each region. District superintendents occupy career positions and are charged with implementing and supervising the educational policies of the department in each district.

Puerto Rico introduced a new standardized achievement test in the 2002–2003 Scholl year in order to comply with No Child Left Behind (NCLB) requirements. Puerto Las Pruebas de Aprovechamiento Académico (PPAA) was developed by Educational Testing Service (ETS) and consists of three tests: Reading in Spanish, Reading in English, and Mathematics. It is administered in Grades 3–8 and Grade 11.

To implement interventions with low-performing schools and support them in achieving adequate yearly progress (AYP), the PRDE sought outside funding, applying for and winning a major grant from the U.S. Department of Education’s Title II office.

Selection Criteria

The PRDE began classifying schools as low performing before the enactment of NCLB, using standardized test scores as the major criterion. Thus, although NCLB ranking started in 2001, Puerto Rico already had seven schools in their seventh year of improvement status as of 2007. For the third straight year, the department failed to publicize the list of school improvement plans (SIPs) before the start of classes, as required by NCLB, because its data was not ready. It is expected that the student information system introduced in 2007 will solve this problem. One major issue regarding SIPs is the number of schools that have been chronically low performing and how the department will intervene with them.

Puerto Rico’s accountability plan outlining how the commonwealth holds schools accountable was updated with the U.S. Department of Education in September 2006 (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). Table PR-1 outlines the ways in which the commonwealth’s plan addresses the 10 principles required by NCLB.

Table PR-1. Puerto Rico AYP Measures

| NCLB AYP Determination Requirement | Puerto Rico's Approach |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| Assessment | Puerto Las Pruebas de Aprovechamiento Academico (PPAA) |
| Proficiency Target | Percent Proficiency/Index |
| Starting Point | 20th Percentile |
| Participation | 95% |
| Additional Measure | Attendance/Graduation Rate |
| Additional Provisions | No |
| Minimum Number for Subgroups | |
| Accountability/Performance | 30 |
| Participation | 30 |
| Confidence Intervals | Yes (95%) |
| Other | Yes—Spanish as a Second Language (SSL) |

Source: U.S. Department of Education, 2007.

Table PR-2 outlines the number of low-performing schools—those identified as in need of improvement (INI)—by year of designation. Since Puerto Rico serves as one district, this profile does not include a table of low-performing districts.

Table PR-2. Puerto Rico Low-Performing Schools, Academic Year 2007–2008

| No. of Schools in Common-wealth | No. (%) of Schools Designated as Low-Performing | Number of Years Designated | | | | | | | | |
|---------------------------------|---|----------------------------|-----|-----|-----|----|----|---|---|---------|
| | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | Exiting |
| 1,505 | 749 (50%) | 105 | 152 | 180 | 231 | 55 | 19 | 7 | - | 51 |

Note: Years Designated corresponds to previously noted NCLB designations accordingly: Year 1 = INI (year 1), Year 2 = INI (year 2), Year 3 = Corrective Action, Year 4 = Restructuring (year 1), Year 5 = Restructuring (year 2), Year 6 = Restructuring (year 3), Year 7 = Restructuring (year 4), Year 8 = Restructuring (year 5).

Source: Puerto Rico Departamento de Educación (n.d).

Note: The following sections of this profile are grounded in data gathered from interviews conducted between July and November 2007. The SEA website, official SEA policies and administrative policies, legislation, court cases, and other official documents, supplement the interviews and focus groups.

Interventions with Low-Performing Schools

Table PR-3. Puerto Rico Interventions with Low-Performing Schools

| | |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| Policies | None applicable. |
| Primary Focus of Intervention | Schools—100 schools in their fourth to seventh year of not making AYP. Each school develops a leadership team that must include the principal, teachers, parents, and community members. |
| Services | |
| Site-Specific | Ten outside vendors (school improvement organizations and universities) that each serve 10 schools with a budget of \$1.5 million for 10 months, May through December 2007, funded by a Title II grant. (This report draws on interviews with four of the vendors.) Each vendor assigned one or more consultant(s) to its schools to provide assistance to leadership teams, principals, teachers, parents, and sometimes student leaders. |
| Planning Assistance | Each vendor helped school teams develop and monitor school improvement plans, beginning with schoolwide processes for developing shared vision and mission and comprehensive plans. |
| Work with Data | Each vendor provided training and consultation on how to analyze student data provided by the PRDE to target academic improvement. |

| | |
|-----------------------------|---|
| Professional Development | Content-specific workshops for teachers and other groups, which varied by vendor; most addressed literacy in some way. Examples include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expeditionary Learning—reading and writing institutes, 5-day residential; Active Pedagogy workshops offered in schools. • ASPIRA—test preparation, cultural competencies, student leadership. • Fundacion Comunitaria—teacher study groups, where teachers choose their own academic focus and design improvement efforts. |
| Convening Schools/Districts | Each vendor provided summer residential institutes for cross-school clusters. Some plan to connect schools via a website; some plan to bring school teams together periodically. |
| Sanctions | None |
| Monitoring | Senior PRDE officials meet with vendors regularly and review reports of work with schools. |

Rationale for Intervention

The Iniciativa Sistemica Transformacion Escolar (ISTE) approach was designed by the former Under-Secretary of Education and managed by another administrator, both of whom have now left the department. The new Under-Secretary of Education had served as the assistant to the previous Under-Secretary and, prior to that, was a school principal. She is considering the current approach carefully and has begun to modify it. She said, “ISTE began because of the department’s concern with helping the schools that are low in performance. So, we had to think about ways to help the schools directly from the academics here at the central office” (interview, August 28, 2007).

The PRDE’s rationale, both with the former and current under-secretaries, focuses on the school as the unit of change and the importance of providing intensive systemic assistance to low-performing schools at the restructuring stage of identification. (Low-performing schools at earlier phases use their own Title I budget for professional development and can get assistance from the department on data analysis and academic content such as literacy.) The Under-Secretary of Education said, “The school is responsible for academic achievement and for its own decisions. It takes school power to get results” (interview, August 28, 2007). School empowerment (or in Spanish *autogestion*) was and remains one of the core principles of the ISTE approach. She repeatedly emphasized this point, noting, “I have a bias. I come from schools. I belong to schools,” and went on to emphasize this point by saying that she sees the department’s role not as controlling but rather as supporting schools in areas such as academic standards, budgeting, and infrastructure (interview, August 28, 2007).

Preconditions

The PRDE identified 100 schools to receive intensive assistance from outside vendors (school improvement organizations and universities). Department staff chose the 100 schools that had been identified as low performing the longest and were most in need.

Because the department sought outside vendors to work closely with the identified schools, a precondition was finding subcontractors that had credibility and strong experience with school improvement. The department determined that it did not have the capacity to provide the intensive assistance such work required, sought extra funding for this purpose, and, as noted, won a large Title II grant. The grant provides each vendor with a budget of \$1.5 million to work with 10 schools. (Getting access to the awarded funds was identified as a problem at all levels: department staff reported that there was a time lag in receiving the federal money, and three of the four vendors said that they had not received any money after 5 months of work.)

Strategies

The ISTE request for proposals (RFP) asked organizations to propose a “flexible model” to help schools involve important stakeholders, including non-educators such as parents and community members, to develop and implement school improvement plans that address academic improvement, and to improve the overall culture and climate of the school. The proposed model had to include work in the following areas: school planning, *autogestion*/school empowerment and transformational leadership, action research (in classrooms and the community), and collaborative school climate and culture (PRDE, 2006). Vendors were required to begin work with a collaborative needs assessment in order to ensure that the assistance they provided was suitable to and focused on the needs of the school, another way that school empowerment was emphasized by the state. They were also required to focus on both academic outcomes and “resiliency”—the ability to adapt to or resist being negatively affected by stresses, catastrophes, and/or other negative factors in one’s life—as well as to convene and support shared decision-making teams with members of the larger stakeholder community. However, how they did this work was left up to them. Vendors provided their services in different ways: Some focused more on teacher development, while others included students in their leadership teams and summer retreats. All four provided cross-school summer planning retreats and training sessions in addition to in-school consultation and professional development.

Autogestion/school empowerment was and remains a core principle for the ISTE project. The new department leadership and the vendors interviewed all stressed their role as facilitating schools to make their own change and helping groups in schools take responsibility for improving schools to teach all students. Thus, all four vendors led sessions to collaboratively develop a shared vision and mission in each school, all involving school administrators, teachers, and parents—as required by the RFP—and some going further to involve students and community organizations. As one vendor said, “The most important part of our intervention is empowerment and to make sure we intervene with all components [role groups] and help them think about and take ownership of their solutions to their own problems. . . .It’s good if the director [principal] is a leader, but if not, all should take responsibility,” (interview, August 30, 2007).

Resiliency was identified by the former leader of the ISTE program as a core principle. Early in the project, department leaders provided vendors with an orientation to the concept and vendors dealt with it in different ways: One incorporated it into pre- and

post-surveys; another provided print resources to school teams on the subject; a third interpreted it as “a resilient school produces resilient students” (interview, August 30, 2007). In Fall 2007, one of the ISTE schools was featured in a local newspaper for its projects on resiliency. The current Under-Secretary of Education sees the emphasis on resiliency as reflecting the department’s concern for students, for the whole child, and not just passing a test or making AYP. Nevertheless, she sees it as a “psychological not a pedagogical approach,” and she is considering eliminating it as a focus of the work (interview, August 28, 2007). The concept was not strongly visible in the work to date, nor did it seem to permeate the vendors’ approach in the way that school empowerment did.

Although the RFP was published in October 2006, the contractors were not able to start work until March 2007, with contracts until December 2007; these were extended to June 2008. The contractors started work with schools in spring 2007, ran training sessions for leadership groups, and in some cases for teachers, in June and July during 2007 summer vacation, and continued throughout the 2007–2008 school year.

Intended Outcomes

The PRDE called for vendors to focus on both academic and affective outcomes, with its emphasis on literacy and resiliency. Although the department did not require vendors to have an evaluation plan, the four vendors interviewed for this report did in fact have evaluation plans and staff.

Lead SEA Contact(s)

Lead SEA Contact at Time of Data Collection:

Yolanda Vilches, Deputy Commissioner of Education, Puerto Rico Department of Education

Current Lead SEA Contact:

Dr. Juan J. Rodríguez, Deputy Commissioner for Academics, Puerto Rico Department of Education

Challenges and Future Plans

At the time of the interviews, a new staff person had been hired to review all vendors’ proposals, reports, and school plans. The PRDE was considering several revisions to its approach, including changing or abandoning the ISTE process. Service providers’ contracts were extended through the 2007–2008 school year as an interim measure.

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The Regional Educational Laboratory Northeast and Islands (REL-NEI) is administered by Education Development Center, Inc. (EDC) in partnership with American Institutes for Research (AIR), and WestEd's Learning Innovations program. REL-NEI is one of 10 Regional Educational Laboratories funded by the Institute of Education Sciences at the U.S. Department of Education. It provides rigorous research that is relevant to national education priorities, responsive to local needs, and usable for policy and practice. Visit www.relnei.org.

This project has been funded at least in part with federal funds from the U.S. Department of Education under Contract Number ED-06-CO-0025. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Education nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.

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