

UNPUBLISHED OPINION

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This morning, and every morning, school children across the island of Puerto Rico will arrive at schools where they lack up-to-date books and other vital educational resources. They won't have access to technology, and their teachers will lack the support and training necessary to help them succeed. Their schools will fail to provide safe, supportive, healthy learning environments, and the school system will fail to ensure high academic standards, professional accountability, and transparency around the use of funds. In short, the very people and institutions responsible for providing social and educational opportunity for some of our nation's most disadvantaged children will fail them. I should know because I failed them too.

At 42, I accepted the position of Secretary of Education in Puerto Rico. Although I was honored to be chosen, I knew that this responsibility would be a heavy lift. I know my personal strengths and weaknesses. I am not a person who enjoys the spotlight. I had never held a position that placed me in public view. I prefer to give detailed responses to questions; I'm not good at simplifying complexities for the sake of a good soundbite. And I am more inclined to quietly analyze data and create project plans than to persuade or inspire people to do what they should be doing anyway as professionals.

Even some of my greatest strengths were liabilities as a leader, although I will never apologize for my passion for results, my commitment to standing up to oppression and injustice, and my conviction that the system should be working better for children. During my 28 months as Secretary of Education, I did my best to improve the conditions in which teachers teach and students learn. I set out to reduce the power and influence of political appointees and create greater accountability. And I resisted excessive federal intervention and demanded equitable allocation of federal disaster recovery funds.

Yet, even though my heart was in the right place and my intentions were good, I was missing some of the elements necessary for success: patience, empathy, perspective, cultural sensitivity, and communication skills. In today's light I can understand how these missing ingredients affected my leadership capacity and alienated the very people who were central to effectuating the change I so desperately wanted to bring about. Ultimately, it was a recipe for failure.

I regret that my tenure as Secretary coincided with both Hurricane Maria and the mandate from those who hired me to right-size the system, close schools, and address the Department of Education's shrinking budget. School closures are painful in any community, and I came across

as a heartless technocrat, cold and uncaring, who was only interested in solving a math problem. I walked blindly into this task, relying on logic and data completely disconnected from the perception that many saw the closures as an affront to the island's culture and history.

In retrospect, communicating with numbers and spreadsheets did little to win the hearts and minds of parents who had their children in our schools. What I should have done—what I needed to do—was to highlight the impact of proposed reforms on kids, and how schools and communities might work together to navigate the changes and benefit our students.

But while I, and many others, can point to mistakes I made and flaws in my leadership, my personal and professional failings cannot explain the failure of public education in Puerto Rico. There is enough blame for these conditions to go around.

Right now, Puerto Rico continues to substantially underfund its schools. The condition of its buildings would not be tolerated on the mainland. The textbooks used by teachers and students were written well before the current college and career ready standards and are badly out of date. Professional development for staff is incoherent and ineffectual. Technology is shockingly absent. Talent is poorly deployed and largely political. Accountability for results is non-existent. And the future of the island's students is being seriously compromised by a system designed more with the needs of adults in mind.

I have admitted my political and professional mistakes, but it is past time for the leadership in Puerto Rico to admit to the unjust conditions that continue to be perpetuated by the current dysfunctional educational system on the island. What the island requires at this point is strong leadership that is committed to improvement and reform, but is equipped with the perspective, cultural sensitivity, and communication skills I lacked.

Allowing my rapid rise and fall to be used as an excuse for inaction simply sustains the educational problems that contribute to the island's generational poverty and limited employment prospects. These are challenges that came before me, and they continue to this day. They are too large, too entrenched, and too longstanding to blame on any one individual. It is time to recognize that systemwide failure can only be met with systemwide change, and time to start seeking broader accountability for failing the children of Puerto Rico.