

EXPANDED ANSWER 45: EDUCATION

EXISTING SITUATION

1. Vieques schools have the worst performance of all of the schools in Puerto Rico.
2. Puerto Rican schools perform worse than schools in the states.
3. Puerto Rico spends approximately \$11,000/year/student, as does the US on average, while paying teachers less than half of the average wages stateside.
4. Vieques currently has around 1,500 K-12 enrolled students, which equates to approximately 130 per grade level, however, the numbers begin high and erode dramatically as children get older and move away from our horrible school system.
5. Vieques graduated 48 seniors in 2016 from a class that began with over 250 at kindergarten.

Our school system is criminally bad. We are the worst of the worst. There are no other words for it. We need a fresh start with a new approach. We need a ground up re-creation of a whole new school system, and we require considerable help from outside experts.

VISION

Breadth of public-school offerings:

- Affordable preschool and daycare must be offered to extend education from the cradle to the grave and to free parents to attend jobs, careers, volunteer positions, or higher education for themselves.
- K through 12 should include options for both mainstream and alternative systems such as Montessori. Basics should include a strong core focused on critical thinking.
- Vocational training should be a choice as a track in high school for those not intending to go to college. This could include hospitality, vehicular maintenance/repair, construction, retail, office work, medical technician, or other areas and specialties.
- Intern programs in both academic and vocational settings should be created to allow high school students to experience different opportunities that may capture their interests.
- Continuing/adult education for vocational training or retraining is essential in a world where technology changes eliminating some jobs and creating new opportunities for others.

General curriculum beyond the basics:

- Bilingual teaching and learning is essential, but not just a Spanish program with English inserted or vice versa. It should be an integrated program that is internally consistent. An acceptable program may not already exist and may need to be developed. If so, this would provide an excellent opportunity to create and test such a solution.

- Enrichment programs to include athletics, physical fitness, the arts, and remedial assistance should be provided through extended days during or after normal academics.
- Life skills classes should be included at appropriate levels in and after school activities. Graduates of high school should possess the knowledge to effectively manage a household. They should receive parenting training including introduction to child psychology and health. They should have the basics of ethics, nutrition, cooking, cleaning and maintaining a home, energy conservation, driving and maintaining a car, banking (checkbook balancing), consumer credit, budgeting, applying for work, work ethic, etc.
- The internet offers phenomenal educational opportunities that can be utilized in both a classroom setting and in independent study. A program to teach, monitor, and encourage this form of lifelong learning should be included at all levels.
- As an independent country, Vieques will have new international opportunities upon which we can capitalize if we are prepared. Different technologies, languages, and roles will identify subject areas that might need to be rapidly added to our basic curriculum.

Logistical issues:

It is well known and commonly agreed that in order to break the cycle of poverty that contributes to the failure of efforts to educate our youth, we must increase the proportion of time that the children are being exposed to the desired curriculum and learning environment. This means more and longer days engaged with school activities. It also means a broader range of varied and positive activities beyond core academics.

- Multiple recess periods throughout the longer school day should be scheduled to allow children to exercise, wake up, become reinvigorated, have some fun, snack, and assist the more disruptive children to settle down.
- Lunch periods should be adequate in length and only nutritionally balanced meals and snacks should be available.
- Consideration should be given to extending the school year (year round) and including more, but shorter, vacations. This would make the program more integrated with normal life, allow family vacations at more varied times without crowds at destinations or higher prices, and eliminate the “retraining” to get everyone back up to speed each fall.
- More teachers must be hired. They need to be paid more, and the pay scale should reflect their education, skills, and performance. Some teacher assistant positions can be utilized as paid internships.
- Substitute teachers must be included to fill short and long term absences.
- Existing teachers may require additional training to meet the new goals of the system.
- Our own educators need to be included in the discussions with outside experts, sponsors, and funding sources.

OTHER THOUGHTS

It is unlikely that there would be a university in Vieques. Therefore, college prep would be aimed toward schools in other countries. It is intended that students would attend schools around the world becoming familiar with different cultures and gaining work experiences within a wide range of new and different offerings. It is further hoped, that at some point, many of the graduates would return to Vieques with their acquired skills and insights to contribute to the community in a more informed manner. It should be an additional goal of the education system to provide classes at a college or university extension on the island to allow some to work toward associate or bachelor degrees.

As important as any other element of the program, a plan of motivating parents to stress and encourage education must be included. It is certain that not all parents will care, and not all students will perform. It is our goal to reach everyone, but our initial focus is to develop our programs to target the 90 to 95% or so that can be reached efficiently, without excessive resource demands.