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September 20, 2018

The Honorable Virginia Foxx
 Chairwoman
 Committee on Education and the Workforce
 2176 Rayburn House Office Building
 Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairwoman Foxx,

Today marks one full year since the catastrophic Category 5 hurricanes struck Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. I write to you, again, to request that the Committee on Education and the Workforce hold a hearing with officials from the U.S. Department of Education and the Office of Management and Budget to examine whether the federal response afforded the Territories the resources and flexibility needed to reopen and resume operations in public schools and institutions of higher education¹.

The U.S. Virgin Islands Board of Education reported that post-hurricane school enrollment dropped by nearly 4,000 students.² Of 32 schools in the territory, 10 closed. At least eight schools were condemned due to irreparable damage.³ As a result, many schools had to operate on double session schedules so that students could at least receive 180 days of instruction. However, the sessions did not allow students to receive the required 1,080 hours of instruction. To end double sessions by this fall's back to school season, Governor Kenneth Mapp announced a plan for temporary repairs to most schools and modular unit installation to demolished school campuses.⁴ Temporary repairs prioritized replacing ceiling and floor tiles, sanitization, and safe treatments for mold.⁵

¹ Scott, R. (2017, Nov 9). Scott Letter to Foxx Puerto Rico Hearing Request. Committee on Education and the Workforce. Retrieved from <https://democrats-edworkforce.house.gov/imo/media/doc/2017-11-09%20Scott%20Letter%20to%20Foxx%20Puerto%20Rico%20Hearing%20Request.pdf>.

² Virgin Islands Board of Education. (2018, Aug 31). School Management Accountability Report.

³ Legislature of the United States Virgin Islands. (2018, Feb 28). Committee Updated on the Status of the Virgin Islands Education System Post Hurricane Irma and Hurricane Maria. Retrieved from <http://www.legvi.org/committee-updated-on-the-status-of-the-virgin-islands-education-system-post-hurricane-irma-and-hurricane-maria-2/>

⁴ Shimel, J. (2018, April 9). Governor Sketches Out School Remediation Plan. St. John TradeWinds. Retrieved from <https://www.stjohntradewinds.com/governor-sketches-out-school-remediation-plan/>

⁵ DaMajority (2018, Aug 27). Governor Mapp Tours St. Croix Ahead of New School Year. DaMajority Caribbean Online Magazine. Retrieved from <https://www.damajority.com/governor-mapp-tours-st-croix-schools-ahead-of-new-school-year/>

Puerto Rico also continues to deal with serious trauma. Recently, the government finally acknowledged that the initial count of 64 lost lives was grossly inaccurate. In fact, nearly 3,000 people lost their lives due to Hurricane Maria, significantly more than Hurricane Katrina's estimate.⁶ Sadly, George Washington University researchers – the team tasked with the official recount – anticipate that a second analysis will reveal a higher mortality count. Although electricity has been restored, the power grid remains fragile and officials acknowledge that the island is not prepared for the current hurricane season.⁷ Given the circumstances, a joint study by Puerto Rico's Department of Education (PRDOE) and the Medical University of South Carolina found that roughly one in every 10 students is exhibiting symptoms of trauma at school.⁸

Compounding the trauma and anxiety are hastily implemented reforms and school closures without community input from citizens relying on schools as anchor institutions for a return to stability. Last summer, shortly before Hurricane Maria, the PRDOE closed 165 out of 1,278 schools due to a decline in student enrollment. This summer, 265 more were summarily closed before the start of the 2018-2019 school year – effectively cutting one-third of public school options from the island within a year.⁹ Families only learned of those closings with the rest of the public from the news media.

The first day back to school in Puerto Rico was nothing short of chaotic. Many students returned to temporary classrooms on which the island has spent millions in FEMA aid.¹⁰ Educators continued to wait for replacement books, computers, and repairs in classrooms they could not occupy despite overcrowding. Hundreds of displaced teachers awaited school reassignments. At least one school held a teacher walk-out to protest a new law's expansion of charter schools and the changes to the education system. As of August 17, 2018, Puerto Rico had not spent any of its \$589 million funding set aside specifically for school recovery while PRDOE claims the process is just slow.¹¹ This month, PRDOE announced that it will spend less than 10 percent of the funds on hiring school nurses to address trauma and nutrition.¹² Although schools have been in session

⁶ Achenbach, J., Hernandez, A., Schmidt, S. (2018, Aug 28). Study: Hurricane Maria and its aftermath caused a spike in Puerto Rico deaths, with nearly 3,000 more than normal. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/study-hurricane-maria-and-its-aftermath-caused-a-spike-in-puerto-rico-deaths-with-nearly-3000-more-than-normal/2018/08/28/57d6d2d6-aa43-11e8-b1da-ff7faa680710_story.html?utm_term=.97099418df8b

⁷ Mazzei, P. (2018, May 14). Puerto Rico Nervously Prepares for Hurricane Season: 'What if Another One Comes?' *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/14/us/puerto-rico-hurricane-season.html>

⁸ Stratford, M. (2018, Sept 6). Puerto Rico aims disaster aid at hurricane-related trauma. *Politico*. Retrieved from <https://subscriber.politicopro.com/newsletters/morning-education/2018/09/trump-administration-kicks-off-next-round-of-higher-ed-rulemaking-331847>

⁹ Mazzei, P. (2018, June 1). Puerto Rico's Schools Are in Tumult, and Not Just Because of Hurricane Maria. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/01/us/puerto-rico-school-closings.html>

¹⁰ Ujifusa, A. (2018, Aug 15). Clash of Visions as New School Year Opens in Storm-Bruised Puerto Rico. Retrieved from <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2018/08/15/clash-of-visions-as-new-school-year.html>

¹¹ Emma, C. (2018, Aug 17). An update on disaster recovery spending. *Politico*. Retrieved from <https://subscriber.politicopro.com/newsletters/morning-education/2018/08/an-update-on-disaster-recovery-spending-320590>

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for over a month, it is still unclear how or when the rest of the funds will be spent to meet the needs of students and teachers.

With recovery far from over, Members of the Committee and the American public should have the opportunity to hear directly about the federal government's ongoing efforts to address the educational needs of our fellow citizens in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. I look forward to your support for a hearing that helps us to learn about the Administration's effort to bring stability to the impacted Territories, specifically as it relates to prioritizing recovery efforts to ensure that students, teachers, and families have the resources necessary to live and learn safely in their communities.

Sincerely,



ROBERT C. "BOBBY" SCOTT
Ranking Member