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 AND THE WORKFORCE  
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November 9, 2017

The Honorable Virginia Foxx  
 Chairwoman  
 Committee on Education and the Workforce  
 2175 Rayburn House Office Building  
 Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairwoman Foxx,

I write to request that the Committee hold a hearing with officials from the U.S. Department of Education (Department) and the Office of Management and Budget in order to examine whether the federal response is affording Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands the resources and flexibility needed to reopen and resume operations in public schools and institutions of higher education. Both Territories recently experienced catastrophic Category 5 hurricanes, the immediate effects of which have been compounded by stalled response and recovery efforts.

On October 24, 2017 a bipartisan group of more than 60 Representatives sent the attached letter to the Trump Administration underscoring the need for supplemental appropriations to assist Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands and their local education agencies with recovery efforts. To date, there has been minimal progress in resuming school operations and little information has been made available to the Committee concerning any supplemental appropriations request from the Administration to Congress. Unfortunately, this is not unique to the Committee on Education and the Workforce. Ranking Members from both the Committees on Homeland Security<sup>1</sup> and Oversight and Government Reform<sup>2</sup> have requested hearings with agency officials and White House representatives regarding the status of recovery efforts only to have the hearings postponed – often with no justifiable reason and without being rescheduled.

According to the US Department of Education, only 119 out of 1,112 public schools in Puerto Rico – approximately 10 percent of the island's public schools – have officially reopened. As for the citizens, approximately 25 percent of residents have power and 75 percent have water – highlighting the need to reopen community anchor institutions like schools and universities that provide safety, security, and a welcoming environment for citizens. Similarly, the U.S. Virgin Islands has also seen many of its schools totally destroyed as well as extensive damage to the

<sup>1</sup> <https://democrats-homeland.house.gov/sites/democrats.homeland.house.gov/files/documents/femahearing.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://democrats-oversight.house.gov/sites/democrats.oversight.house.gov/files/documents/2017-09-29.EEC%20Plaskett%20to%20Gowdy%20re%20Hurricane%20Response.pdf>

two universities which receive federal aid. The situation in the Virgin Islands is further complicated by the lack of internet connectivity throughout the island. While officials from the Department are in the process of helping these territories develop their applications for grant funding, the fact remains that these territories have not been able to receive federal assistance with the same manner of ease and efficiency as Florida and Texas.

Members of Congress and the greater public have been left with very few answers and very little details about the recovery efforts in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, particularly with regard to the operational capacity of impacted public schools. Secretary DeVos visited Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands this week to get an update from local officials on relief efforts to help students resume learning. On this trip, the Secretary announced a two million dollar Project SERV award for Puerto Rico, and it is my understanding that the Department is engaged in development of a similar award application with education officials in the US Virgin Islands. While Project SERV awards to the territories are a step in the right direction, more must be done to support long-term recovery and rebuilding. The Secretary has yet to appear before this Committee, and we would greatly benefit from learning more about the Department's recovery efforts.

While migration from affected areas to the US mainland is expected, the Administration and Congress must do everything they can to bring stability to the impacted Territories, including prioritizing relief and recovery efforts to ensure that students, teachers, and families have the resources necessary to live and learn safely in their communities. Members of the Committee and the American public should have the opportunity to hear directly about the efforts going on to ensure that the federal government is providing the most comprehensive assistance possible to the our fellow American citizens in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Sincerely,



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**ROBERT C. "BOBBY" SCOTT**  
Ranking Member