



Storms and Reforms

Puerto Rico's Department of Education has been getting an extreme makeover under alumna Julia Keleher. It was a Herculean task even before the catastrophic hurricane.

By Samuel Hughes



Storms come in many forms and levels of intensity. For most of this warm January morning, Julia Keleher C'96 GEd'98 has been a crisp offshore breeze ruffling the palms. It's the first day of classes, heralding a new year that everyone on the island hopes will be more merciful than the last one.

The 43-year-old Keleher, Puerto Rico's Secretary of Education, is finishing up her third school visit of the morning—presenting a specially commissioned Three Kings Day print (artfully decorated with images of desks and backpacks), sitting in on classes, posing for selfies with high-schoolers, and giving multiple stand-up interviews in Spanish and English to the pack of TV and newspaper reporters that follow her. Most of us press types can barely keep up with her, and we're not wearing high heels.

Then, on the way back to San Juan in her government-issued SUV, the ozone suddenly crackles. The slight, intense Keleher is morphing into Hurricane *Hoolia*—rapid-firing into her phone from the passenger seat, while our flashing blue police lights and periodic *berp-berps* warn motorists to yield at intersections that still lack functioning stoplights.

"Nadie me buscó a mí!" she snaps in excellent Spanish. *"Nadie! Yo no voy a responder a las manifestaciones!"*

My own Spanish is less than excellent these days, but I get the gist of why Keleher is storming. She's just gotten wind of a demonstration staged by community activists in Caguas, roughly 20 miles south of here. They're demanding that a vocational school, badly damaged by Hurricane Maria, be reopened. Since that Category 5 catastrophe, students have been forced to attend classes at another high school that lacks the equipment and space to provide vo-tech instruction. Three-and-a-half months later, their ire has reached a tipping point.

Keleher gets their frustration. What galls her is that the organizers had not tried to contact her before taking it to the streets. She believes in process, she doesn't like getting blindsided, and the school building is a disaster. So she scolds and vents for a good 10 minutes, and when she hangs up, she casts a side-long glance in my direction. "That wasn't as bad as it sounded," she says.

Not bad at all, really. More like *badass*. I'm starting to understand why a colleague in the Department of Education (DE) recently compared the experience of meeting her to "touching a bolt of lightning."

When we talk weeks later by phone, the storm in Caguas has calmed. Keleher explains that while the schools are still sharing a building, her department is working with FEMA to get trailers or some such alternate space. "Ideally, we need to do an investment in our vocational program and rebuild some of these schools," she adds. As we talk, my phone *buloops*—she's just forwarded me a text message from a school official, accompanied by photos of the students and faculty, thanking her for helping them return to their school. She offers to put me in touch with someone who's handling it, but by then there are so many other storms gathering that I just move on to my next question, prompted by a recent announcement from the governor's office that includes some eye-catching numbers.

Really? I ask. They're going to close 300 more schools?

“ think we've come to a new normal,” Keleher is saying. “And a new normal should never be confused with how it should be, or where we're going.”

She's sitting at a conference table in one of the DE's two large administrative buildings in San Juan's Tres Monjitas Industrial Park section, in the middle of another insanely busy day of meetings, interviews, school visits, Twitter blasts, planning sessions, and more meetings. (“I don't know how she does it,” says one

of the DE's regional directors. “She works 24/7. We were getting emails from her at 2 o'clock in the morning, and I'm like, ‘Oh my God, she doesn't sleep.’”) Her observations about normality were prompted by my question about how things have changed since the first time we spoke in November. Back then, she was still coping with the adjective-defying slam of Hurricanes Irma and Maria—making sure that most of the schools across the island were open as emergency shelters and that kids were getting fed, coming up with hurricane-related learning projects, and projecting a sense of being in control of a situation that was pretty much uncontrollable.

“We're doing better,” she says, “but we're doing better in an environment that really was lacking good operational procedures to begin with. We've moved past the stress of the emergency response. It's not so intense and over the top. There are just things that we now know we need to deal with.”

At the time of this January visit, Keleher has just completed her first year on the job, which is arguably the most challenging educational post of its kind in the United States even without Maria, the worst hurricane in a century. (As I write this in early April, about 10 percent of the island still lacks electricity, the total damage has been estimated at \$100 billion, and some 23,000 more students have fled with their families to the mainland.)

But the real storm had been brewing long before Maria. Different people point fingers in different directions, but the territory has been in a recession since 2006, and the government's Fiscal Agency and Financial Advisory Authority blames years of “fiscal irresponsibility, ineffective leadership, and lack of long-term economic planning.” By February 2014, Moody's and Standard & Poor's ratings services had lowered the government's credit rating to junk bond status. As an unincorporated territory, Puerto Rico couldn't file for bankruptcy under Chapter 9, so in 2016, President Barack Obama signed the Puerto Rico Oversight,

Management and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA), which contains some Chapter 9-like provisions. It also authorized a seven-member Financial Oversight and Management Board to negotiate the Commonwealth's debt restructuring. (Chaired by José B. Carrion III C'92, the board's members include Penn Law Professor David A. Skeel Jr. as well as Sebastián Negrón Reichard C'16 W'16, who serves as deputy for contract oversight and support.) By last May, long-term debt and pension obligations had reached \$123 billion. When Governor Ricardo Rosselló took office in January 2017, the \$3 billion budget deficit he reportedly thought he was inheriting turned out to be \$7.5 billion. That is not good news for individual departments. Education, with a budget of \$2.5 billion and a massive, highly centralized administrative structure, was an inevitable target.

The department “is about 40 percent of our payroll, 30-some percent of our operating costs of government,” noted Rosselló in an interview. “So you're essentially talking about a third of the government right there. And historically, it had been looked upon as a place to put people based on political favors, though I don't like to generalize, because there are some phenomenal educators here.” Still, it's a system that has some 51,000 employees, 20,000 of whom are administrative. “So something needed to change.”

Nobody was surprised that one component of the reform package put together by the governor's office and the DE involved closing schools, especially the storm-damaged ones. After all, there are 40 percent fewer students in the island's public school system than there were a decade ago, and according to Keleher, some 500 schools are operating at less than 60 percent occupancy. But the scale of closures, and the number of families affected, is jaw-dropping. Just five years ago, there were 1,460 public schools on the island. Now there are 1,110, with another 283 scheduled to be



closed. That target number was “based on the work we did on the fiscal plan for the control board,” says Keleher, which involved “looking at the number of kids we have and taking all the buildings to a 90 percent utilization rate.”

She knows that closing the schools, which should save an estimated \$150 million, will cause pain in many communities. But she sees the closures as an unpleasant necessity, and one that will ultimately result in a better and safer—as well as leaner—school system.

“Your system, this one you’re demanding that I open to provide terrible, unhealthy conditions in which people will work and students will purport to learn without electricity, is not producing results and wasn’t doing so before,” she said back in November, after rattling off some depressing numbers concerning the academic proficiency of students across the island. In her view, the fights over clo-

sures are an unproductive distraction. “And every time you distract from the conversation that you should be having, we’re promoting the continued oppression of people who haven’t been given an experience of high quality that they deserve from the public education system.”

Keleher is undoubtedly sincere in suggesting that by trying to prop up an old and failing infrastructure, the protesters are—inadvertently—contributing to the academic oppression of the island. She saw her share of sub-standard conditions while working in the so-called Badlands section of North Philadelphia during her stint at Penn’s Graduate School of Education, and her indignation about both systems is palpable. But given the harsh economic realities and the class-driven nature of the debate, that argument may also be a smart political tactic. After all, those conditions post-Maria—which include black mold, leaking roofs,

“Doing nothing and leaving things as they are is not an option.”

and live electrical wires—“would never be accepted” on the mainland, she told me in November. “It’s an injustice, a civil rights problem—a lack of access to normal standards of operation.

“They say ‘You’re coming with this agenda’—and I am,” she added. “I’m coming to transform this, because it doesn’t work, and it’s terrible, and you should have access to [something] better. But I need to do that in a way that’s respectful.

I need to do that in a way that's empowering—that doesn't make me the savior. Because that's not the point. The point is raising awareness—empowering people to demand more and to know that that's their right."

The storm accompanying the education reform legislation moved fast. On March 19, a couple thousand teachers, students, parents, and "members of the working class," in the words of *El Nuevo Día* (Puerto Rico's highest-circulation newspaper) staged a day-long strike. They marched to the steps of the Capitol, carrying signs and "chanting slogans calling for the expulsion of the Secretary of the Department of Education," the paper noted. Puerto Rico is a highly polarized society, and Keleher and her \$250,000 salary were frequent targets. One sign read *Julia Keleher: Go Home*, accompanied by an unflattering drawing of *La Secretaria* and a suggestion that she was selling schools. An animé-style video even lampooned her as a school-closing, cheerleader-ish "Pretty Super Secretary," à la Sailor Moon. One teacher was quoted as saying that the reform package "seeks to privatize and put the education of the country in the hands of entities that do not know the needs of the community."

"By closing schools, rather than seeing public schools as the centers of the community that Puerto Rico needs" to help the island "recover, rebuild, and thrive, the governor is taking a step backward," said Aída Díaz, president of the Asociación de Maestros, and Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), in a joint statement.

But that same day, Puerto Rico's Senate approved the reform legislation crafted and advocated by Rosselló and Keleher, and the following day the House passed its bill (which included more than 200 amendments addressing concerns about an earlier version). Among other things, the legislation paved the way for a major decentralizing restructuring of the de-

partment, approved a limited number of public charter schools and educational vouchers, and budgeted for closing those 283 schools. It also included a modest pay increase (\$1,500 a year, the first in a decade) for teachers, whose average salary is \$27,000. No teachers will be laid off; those at schools to be closed will be transferred to ones staying open.

When I learn about the bill's passage, I shoot her a text asking for her reaction. "Just one small step in a big journey," she texts back quickly.

She's a little more expansive a week later, when she posts the first entry of *Julia Keleher: El Blog* on the DE's website, and at the signing ceremony at La Fortaleza, when she gives a brief but emotional speech to the assembled politicians, administrators, teachers, and students.

"Since I assumed the direction of the DE," she wrote, "I knew that my task would not be easy, that the road would be steep, full of obstacles. But every time I look at our students, I cannot stop thinking that I am on this blessed island with a purpose: to improve the quality of teaching to our students and correct the deficiencies and inequities of a system that can and should be modernized if we want our children to have a better future ... There are difficult decisions to make and I know that we cannot please everyone equally, but I have to put our students first and all my decisions are and will be taken for the welfare of our children.

"Doing nothing and leaving things as they are is not an option," she added. "My responsibility as Secretary and resident of Puerto Rico, which I consider my adopted land, is profound and irrefutable."

During our various interviews, Keleher requested just one thing: a shout-out to her parents, John (GrEd'78 WEv'01) and Beatrice Keleher.

"They supported me in whatever challenge I took on throughout my entire life," she said. "I wouldn't be able to do what I'm doing today if it wasn't for their love and support."

She grew up in the Delaware County suburbs of Philadelphia, though she spent a lot of time in South Philly with her grandmother, and (according to a reliable source who insists on remaining anonymous) would often organize the local kids to do skits. After graduating from Cardinal O'Hara High School, she came to Penn, which she cites as having given her "excellent preparation at both levels"—including the lesson that "you've got to fight your way through; you've got to be tough; and you've got to work hard." She was a poli-sci major as an undergraduate, but I suspect that her most significant academic experience was taking a semester abroad in Madrid, where she jumpstarted her impressive fluency in Spanish. Her GSE experience (specializing in psychological services) in a host of North Philly schools had an important impact, too. "I met enough kids that were struggling in a way that suggested that we could probably do this better," she recalls.

After earning her two Penn degrees, she went on to get a PhD in education leadership and administration (University of Delaware), a certificate in strategic decision-making and risk management (Stanford), and an MBA (Strayer). She put in seven years as an administrator in the Red Clay Consolidated School District in northern Delaware, then moved to the US Department of Education in 2007, where she began working with the Puerto Rican DE and later became a team leader in program risk management and monitoring, among other honors. In 2009 she started her own consulting business, Keleher & Associates, and her involvement with the DE of PR deepened.

The amount of work, stress, and responsibility increased exponentially when she was appointed Secretary of Education. But when I ask her if she ever worries about burnout, she shrugs.

"I've always, my whole life, done more than one thing," she says. "Whether it was going to school and holding two jobs, or whatever—it's like I've been training my whole life to have to work at this level."

Which doesn't mean that she doesn't sometimes wish she had done some things differently.

"A million things," she says. "I'm never happy with my outcome. This is a continuous-improvement kind of process. Once you have the answer for today, in hindsight you may be able to find a way that you could have done that better. If this runs its course and the situation in Puerto Rico improves, I'll still be looking to do things better."

Governor Rosselló is sitting in the Throne Room of La Fortaleza, the palatial governor's residence in Old San Juan whose handsome neoclassical façade belies its 16th-century origins as a colonial fortress. The 39-year-old academic-turned-politician, son of former Governor Pedro Rosselló, was elected in 2016 as head of the New Progressive Party, which advocates for Puerto Rican statehood, among other things. He takes education seriously, having earned his bachelor's degree in biomedical engineering and economics from MIT and his PhD in biomedical engineering from the University of Michigan, followed by several years at Duke doing stem-cell research.

"Even as I was still running for governor, I knew that education was going to be an enormous challenge," he says. "I needed somebody to be transformative, but at the same time to know and understand the Department of Education here in Puerto Rico." Those qualities "essentially were mutually exclusive," he notes. "If you take somebody inside of the system, it's kind of like *The Matrix*—it already owns you."

Having consulted for the department through three political administrations since 2007, Keleher "knew our structure but was never really part of it," Rosselló adds. "And once she came in with a transformative vision, she had the knowledge of how it works, but also the wherewithal to change it. She had the foresight and the passion, but also the managerial ca-

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Healing the Island

Christine Nieves has been creating new narratives for Puerto Rico in the wake of Hurricane Maria.

High up in the storm-raked hills of

Mariana, a band of *trovadores* has just finished its final set of pulsing Caribbean folk music, which involves taking random words or themes and using them to improvise songs. Now they're packing up their guitars and amps at the outdoor community center known as La Loma, a stone's throw down from the rocky outcropping where Christine Nieves C'10 and I are talking.

The *trovadores'* music was a nice touch for this highly improvised Three Kings Day fiesta. The fact that their microphones and guitars were amplified was a small but significant triumph. There was no electricity in this small, mountainous community in the province of Humacao when I visited in early January (and as I write this there's still none, six-and-a-half months after Hurricane Maria ravaged the island). Which is why Nieves and Proyecto de Apoyo Mutuo Mariana (PAM), the grassroots community organization she cofounded, channeled the reliable Puerto Rican sun through a solar generator in order to electrify a festival that featured food and drink as well as books and toys for kids.

"The solar concert is just a little part of showing there's a new narrative that has been there on the edges, in the shadows," says Nieves, as the tree frogs known as *coquies* squeak their urgent, high-pitched song. "I had to come back and find the people that were being the type of Puerto Ricans that don't make it to the news stories, that were living a different narrative and a different story. Because those are the stories that are going to save us—how we are stronger, and are doing amazing things with so little. And because so much of what we say becomes our reality—and you act based upon that. It's all wired into your head."

Since the hurricane upended her life and that of her adopted community, the 30-year-old Nieves has put her abundant energy and storytelling talents to good use. Her narratives have evolved from the crisis-driven—coping with shattered windows and



downed trees and toxic mold without electricity or potable water—to something more celebratory and profound. Or, as she puts it, "taking Maslow's hierarchy of needs and turning it on its head." And while she and PAM explore ways to "bring forth models for living in harmony with the environment," they're also addressing "one of our most fundamental human challenges: healing from individual and collective trauma."

Healing involves many small, practical steps. (An early priority was WiFi, for getting word of their plight out and news of the world in.) Last month she and her partner, composer/musician Luis Rodriguez Sanchez, became co-executive directors of a community organization called ARECMA, which owns La Loma's facilities and provides the legal structure needed to take on more ambitious projects. They were already in the process of converting an abandoned school building into a community center for cultural and artistic endeavors.

"It's like a mini-city," she says of the old school building, a "*Centro de Imaginación* designed to keep hope alive and not only reimagine but enact an alternative to life in the hilltop barrios." She envisions it housing a coffee shop (hoping that the lure of more business will encourage the local roaster to up its game), a small business incubator, space for social workers and counselors, a hostel for volunteers and visitors, workshop

rooms, and manufacturing space for local enterprises. Not to mention a low-cost laundromat—washing clothes being a major challenge in Mariana post-Maria—powered by the largest solar generator in Puerto Rico as a “case study to show that solar generators are safer for the environment and a better alternative to diesel generators.”

As we talk, a car driven by volunteer Jasmine Perez Nu’08 GNu’10 pulls up, filled with boxes of books destined for a reading house they’re building in a nearby park. PAM has collected more than 600 books, part of a “comprehensive effort to make books available in different locations in Mariana.”

“One of the things I asked for as aid was books,” says Nieves. “Everyone said we need water and lights—and that’s important. But history books are also important.” Despite being a native Puerto Rican and having attended some pretty prestigious institutions of higher learning, she knew little about the island’s history. “I’m only now starting to learn it. That’s appalling.”

There is an overarching vision at work, she says: “to reimagine how we live in rural communities so that young people have the option to stay and do meaningful work and develop systems of self-governance and resource management that can better prepare us for future crises.”

A year and a half ago, Nieves gave up a promising academic career to come back to the island that she had left swearing to never return. Her path had led her from the Annenberg School to Oxford (master’s in social policy and social intervention), and—following a stint at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation—to Florida State University, where she was the Entrepreneur in Residence at that school’s College of Communication and Information. Then, on a visit to the island summer before last, she met Rodriguez, a russet-bearded composer from Mariana. (His works include an orchestral accompaniment to the poetry of the late Francisco Matos Paoli, whose verses were declaimed in a performance at the Centro Bellas Artes by one Lin-Manuel Miranda.) Love-sparks flew, and after returning to Tallahassee she knew she had a decision to make.

At the end of 2016, she returned. “The first six months here were so hard,” she says. “I didn’t even say that I was moving to Puerto Rico. I was, like, so afraid of it.”

Last summer, on a fellowship at the Penn-Columbia Social Impact House in Vermont, she began to understand why she had come back. “It was all about stepping into a space of unknown, unlimited possibilities of looking at the future of humanity,” she says, “and at the same time connecting with people who I very quickly felt were going to be important, influential friends and co-conspirators and supporters.”

When she returned from the fellowship in late August, Nieves spent several weeks toggling between Mariana, where she had moved into Rodriguez’s family house, and San Juan. She was scheduled to meet on September 20 with the board of directors of an organization that was planning to open an office that would support high-impact entrepreneurs.

The meeting never happened. The Category 5 hurricane known as Maria blasted into Humacao early that morning. The Rodriguez house might as well have had a bullseye on it. The young couple, along with Rodriguez’s cousin and their cat and dog, scuttled down to the first floor, bringing a few provisions and a candle into the bathroom.

“All of a sudden there was just the shattering sound of glass, glass flying everywhere with water,” recalls Nieves. “And then the cascade of water down the stairs. It felt slightly *Titanic*, even though you knew you were not going to drown, because the water just kept coming in. Then we heard more glass breaking—and sure enough, two windows, the glass door, the skylights, the water heater ...”

Later that morning, when the false calm of the eye passed over, they went outside. “It was like cream,” she says. “Slightly yellow. The bark of the trees was completely stripped. I couldn’t see any green—not even grass. That’s when I noticed that our water cistern, which had a thousand gallons of water, was emptying by one little hole. And that was our only water.”

The roaring winds and torrential rains returned and pummeled the house for another day and a half, flooding it with water and glass and leaves. All the paint

was stripped off—“like a pressure washer had gone through, outside and inside.”

They spent a week digging out and cleaning up. Drawing on the experience of a community center in Caguas, they formed PAM, first to feed people and provide the basics, then to begin addressing the deeper issues, there and across the island.

A few weeks after my visit, Nieves called from Rincon, on Puerto Rico’s western tip, where she was sparking ideas with other community organizers.

“Meeting with all the different mutual-aid groups, we realized we have a lot of very similar needs,” she said. “There’s a fundamental sort of deep spirit behind the work we’re all doing, learning about the relationship between being colonized, living in a colony, and then healing, and the psychological work that relates to communities and entrepreneurship and organizing.”

Even then, she was looking past the grunt work of surviving to more uplifting activities—bringing in artists and speakers, putting on concerts and theatrical performances. She envisions an amphitheater for cultural events and waxes eloquent about the possibilities for other communities like Mariana—ones “that are at risk, with a high population of elderly, and that are stunning. This place is so beautiful, and those who help end up getting so much as well. A treasure like this can be shared in a way that doesn’t take away from its authenticity.”

The journey to Mariana was a circuitous one for Nieves. She grew up in Ponce, on the southern coast, excelling academically while enduring her full share of bullying—an outsized problem on the island, she believes. Her family went from relatively poor to “struggling middle class”—not the background of most Puerto Rican Penn students, who have traditionally been more upper-middle class. But her grades, plus the support of the Hispanic Heritage Foundation, earned her a scholarship.

“It was this incredible experience and opportunity for me,” she says, “and I decided I was going to take full advantage of it.” She laughs a bit sheepishly when I mention the essay she penned as a senior communication major for the *Gazette* [“The Telemundo Kid,” May/June 2010], about her experience

as a host for *En Portada*, Telemundo's public affairs channel in Philadelphia.

"One thing that has happened since I wrote that article is the process of letting go of ego," she says. "I had a lot of energy, and I had done a lot of things. But this process of coming back has been about the opposite, in that I've made decisions towards the less shiny, the counterintuitive. And when everything collapses, you have to choose and confront your own ways of thinking about everything."

That included her perceptions of the island and its people—her people.

"I left blaming Puerto Ricans for their ineptitude," she says. "I just felt that it was a lost cause. There is a way of talking about ourselves that is very *despectivo*, so very negative—almost self-loathing, which then becomes a justification for any bad behavior." She believes that it goes back to "this complicated internal trauma that happens in families, whether it's verbal abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse. And that is more complicated to pinpoint. Does it trace back to slavery? Genocide?"

"What I didn't understand was that there was quite a bit of childhood trauma that I had left here that's endemic, very connected to a lot of the political and social issues that we're facing. You would be hard-pressed to find someone in Puerto Rico that hasn't had childhood trauma, and it passes from generation to generation. And no one talks about it. When, as a people, you haven't been able to speak about the wound and the trauma and whatever it is—the thing that hurt you and was unfair and was terrible—it's going to stay, even if you don't speak about it. Even the political parties are primitive—but they are astute because they've been so good at getting people to be afraid."

In San Juan, she sees people "managing and controlling the media, and creating a different reality, a sort of theater. And meanwhile, we are in the audience, in the darkness, not noticing what happens on the edges. I'm more interested in working from the place that no one's watching. Because we are the people that they're supposedly governing. So we have to figure out a way to govern ourselves." And, perhaps, undo the sense of dependence that she believes has afflicted the colonized Commonwealth.

"For too long, the way Puerto Ricans have been spoken about is always around how much we need and how much we lack, and 'Oh, please, give us some money because we need to put the [power] lines on.' I worked in the area of philanthropy that focused on innovation, and I know they don't want to support projects that are not going to win, right? And I felt that we were learning something—whether it was in social innovation or social entrepreneurship—that we were going to be able to share with the world."

Whatever it is, the word is getting out. In April, the online magazine *Grist* recognized her as one of its annual "Grist 50," which it describes as "the most inspiring innovators and doers working on fresh solutions to the planet's biggest problems." She's both pleased with the recognition and wary of it.

"Lists make [individual] people look like the sole heroes," she says, when in reality the efforts are "almost always collective in nature and designed precisely to be in stark contrast to the hero-ego-centralized-power-control culture which has led us astray."

Over the past months in Mariana, working to resolve local disputes in gentler, more imaginative ways, she has found that the interface between the personal-emotional and the political-physical can overlap in surprising ways.

"Now we're faced with a disaster that all indications point towards more coming," she says. "And so now we are learning that maybe electric infrastructure is not the priority. Maybe it is the social fabric. How do you even start doing that when you've forgotten how to talk to each other, and how to talk to each other in conflict? The cornerstone of what we're building is joy. And if you build from a place of joy—and if you contribute what makes you happy and you know what you can bring to the world—then you can build a very different reality than if you are doing things that you hate all the time.

"Part of it is imagination and dreaming," she says, as a strong breeze blows in from the ocean. "That's what's good about being in Mariana—you're away from cynicism. What feels like a movement to me has to be born there, in the places that have been forgotten, in the space you can dream up."—SH

Storms and Reforms *continued*

pability to see the vast horizon that is the Department of Education—and the capacity to, in an organized manner, start changing it."

Keleher, who moved to the island on accepting the job, allows that she was "kind of the right person at the right time with the right random collection of experiences for a very, very specific need."

"I would not be able to run this system," she says, without that academic background, which includes the "social, emotional, and psychological aspects of how a child learns; the leadership and administration and curriculum instruction, as well as what an MBA gives you." She stresses the need to create a "pipeline of people that understand the relationship between strategic management of budget and resources and human resources in a way that permits effective practices to happen in the classroom."

Her previous decade consulting with the department enabled her to "understand a lot of things about how the agency works," she says, though she acknowledges that for some things she "needed to be here full-time to get a true sense of how dysfunctional they were."

I ask Governor Rosselló what his charge to her was. "Very bluntly, we asked her to break the system and rebuild it again," he says. "On the administrative side, it is a very bureaucratic system, from top to bottom. I asked her to collapse that so that there is more access, less bureaucracy, and more direct service to the students.

"It is probably the hardest job in education in the nation," he adds. "And she's been a superstar. She was just recently recognized as one of the top 12 most influential educators in the nation, and she's been a great breath of fresh air here in Puerto Rico. Of course, it's not without resistance, as [there always is] when transformation comes along."

Eleuterio Alamo, director of the DE's San Juan region, remembers being in meetings with Keleher in 2010 when she was in charge of carrying out a Memorandum of Agreement with the US Department of

Education. When she was appointed Secretary, he says he “knew that we were going to be able to make strong changes” in the system.

“Previous Secretaries just thought about doing things the way they used to get done,” he explains. “Julia, from the beginning, started implementing changes in order to get different results. She was also able to handle the strong political influence from the union, senators, representatives, the government. Usually, whoever doesn’t belong to the party in charge would not agree on things that the Secretary would do because they’d see it with a political perspective. Julia has made it clear that the political has to be out of the system.”

When I asked Keleher in January what sort of feedback she was getting from teachers, she responded: “I think the teachers feel like someone’s paying attention and recognizes what they do. There’s more tension in the reaction from the school directors because I’ve been more demanding, less tolerant. I’ve been more clear about my expectations. The school director is absolutely pivotal to the success of any school system, and if they don’t do their job well, nothing works.”

“The thing that separates the leadership at this moment, and this administration, is execution,” she adds. “I’m not inclined to sit and say I will do something. I’m more inclined to tell you about what I’m doing. So the execution of this breaking of the system is something that doesn’t shock anyone. They’ve said it [needed to be done] for years. We’re doing it.”

It may be a cliché to say that Maria was both a crisis and an opportunity for Puerto Rico’s DE, but there’s also some truth to it. As Ismael Aponte, the regional director of Mayagüez, put it: “Maria took advantage of the island. Julia is taking advantage of Maria.”

In January, Keleher was in the process of restructuring the DE into seven semi-autonomous regions: Arecibo, Bayamon, Caguas, Humacao,

Mayagüez, Ponce, San Juan. Before, she explained, “we had a unitary system of one central office,” which a year ago was responsible for 365,000 kids. (Now, thanks mostly to Maria, the number is around 322,000.) Using an LEA—local education agency—format, those regions “are going to be independent, with their own organizational structure.”

The change appears to have been long overdue. “Principals waste so much time trying to get results here,” says Alamo. “To deal with school organizations and teacher supervisions, you have to go to the [individual] district. To get assistance with human-resource positions, budget issues, you have to come to the region level. And when you have a proposal for academic affairs or whatever service you want to implement in your school, you have to come to the main [central] level in San Juan. So you go to one tier, and they say, ‘Oh, that’s not my job. You have to go to the region.’ There they tell you, ‘No, that’s not us. You have to go to the main level.’”

Ten years ago, “there were 78 municipalities that were also school districts,” says Keleher. “That got consolidated to 28. We’re going to consolidate that to make seven. Each one will have the component parts of what a normal school district would have.” Instead of the previous system, in which each region had 250 administrators, “this new system has between 150 and 180. So you’re seeing more right-sizing, more distribution of resources.”

The idea, Rosselló says, is that “every time she gets an efficiency on the fiscal side, the administrative side, she passes that to be an investment on the student side.”

One of Keleher’s biggest frustrations is not being able to fire people who aren’t performing or qualified, which she blames on “the government structure, the laws, the way this thing is set up.” A somewhat similar complaint regarding hiring is echoed by Alamo. “Let’s say I have a school whose lowest score is in math, and

I need to recruit a good math teacher,” he says. “They recommend somebody who, when I see his previous experience, is not eligible for the position anymore. But the senator, the representative, or sometimes from the governor’s office, they call. And I’m like, ‘Oh, my Lord, how can we get this thing done?’”

According to Maria Christian, the DE’s chief academic officer, one of the most basic changes implemented by Keleher is a rational budgeting system.

“We asked her to break the system and rebuild it again,” says Governor Rosselló.

“In the US, you say, ‘Well, to educate this child for a year, there’s a price tag on it: \$8,000, \$10,000—whatever the school district has determined, based on resources and what the cost of living is in that area. We didn’t have that.’ Under Keleher, the formula has been established for \$6,400 per child.

One of the more contentious issues for the DE’s reform package has been charter schools. It’s hard to gauge Keleher’s enthusiasm for them. When I asked her in early March, she noted simply that charter schools were part of the platform on which Rosselló was elected. She has been quoted elsewhere as saying that, unlike New Orleans after Katrina, “We’re not going to go crazy” with them, and indeed the new legislation capped the number of charter schools at 10 percent. (The charter schools will be free, and there must be at least two for each educational region.)

NPR reported that when Keleher visited a high school in Arecibo in early March, she was “playing offense” on charter schools. After asking the students to “look up the definition of charter school” on their cell phones (“a school that receives government funding but operates independently of the established state school system”), she emphasized that charter schools are still public schools despite being run by private entities. “But everyone is going to take to the streets and say, ‘You want to privatize our schools!’” Keleher reportedly told the students. “I don’t. It’s still public money. Your money.” What charter schools offer, she added, are “more opportunities, more options.”

Unsurprisingly, the teachers unions were less enthusiastic about such changes, especially regarding vouchers (to be capped at 3 percent of total student enrollment). In a statement, Díaz and Weingarten warned that the vouchers inevitably “benefit the few at the expense of the many,” adding that Rosselló “needs to invest in public schools to support and stabilize kids’ learning, not abandon and privatize schools.”

Other aspects of the reform package are unlikely to have many detractors. As Keleher noted in her blog entry, the academic approaches will include project-based learning, “concepts of entrepreneurship,” and a heightened emphasis on STREAM subjects (Science, Technology, Robotics, Engineering, Arts, Mathematics), as well as “social sciences and languages.”

That last word is important. Many Puerto Ricans are, to varying degrees, bilingual. While there have been movements to drop English entirely in favor of the more historic colonial language, that trend has been somewhat reversed in recent years, thanks in part to the internet and other trappings of the modern world. Keleher hopes students will “fully master” both Spanish and English, and bilingual schools are another component of the reform package. But Spanish is still the island’s primary tongue, which affects everything from teachers’ ability to keep

up with the latest developments in the field to—theoretically—textbooks. That second issue is often moot, however.

“The department hasn’t formally purchased books in over 10 years,” notes Maria Christian ruefully. For a variety of reasons, some schools have textbooks; others don’t.

“If you have a vocational school, and they have a Perkins [government-funded grant], then yes,” she explains. “Or there’s a special course for marketing or industrial arts, then yes. If you have a really amazing school principal, it happens. Otherwise ... It’s absurd. It’s embarrassing.”

There’s also been a limited selection of textbooks to choose from, adds Keleher, since in previous years “the Secretary or someone will come in, sell a product, and that would be what the system implemented.”

“Part of the new budgeting process is looking into the cost for books,” says Christian. “But we’re also looking at guided reading methodologies in which you don’t have an anthology—you have a classroom library. Or electronic books.”

When she arrived last summer, Christian recalls, the department was exploring the cost of providing every student in the system with a Kindle or equivalent. Most school districts do a gradual rollout with such things, starting with a single grade or a group of kids.

“You’ve met Julia; it’s all or nothing,” says Christian. “She’s like, ‘No, I want to see what the rollout would be for the entire system.’ And thou shalt not ever say to her, ‘You can’t do that.’”

Puerto Rico has been called the “oldest and most populated colony in the world” by its current governor.

Its singular history and its continued state of dependence—not to mention its lack of representation in Congress—has repercussions that are very much felt today.

Keleher acknowledges that history, and muses about its effect on the island’s educational system.

“I would be wrong to imagine a world where I just stepped in today and began to design the future,” she says. “We got here through a series of events. Even something so simple as the [Territorial] Anthem, which has changed multiple times here, and the names of the schools that are named after major cultural figures—like [poet] Lola Rodríguez de Tío—it’s very important to be sensitive to who those individuals are, the paths they traveled, and the inroads they made.” But it’s also important to make sure that knowledge and that worldview don’t somehow constrict students’ potential for learning and moving forward.

“When your political status helps define how you understand the world, it’s a paradigm, right? And I believe these things are interchangeable. You can say, ‘If our history tells us we were treated as a colony, and that as a result I interpret my experiences a certain way, then what would happen if I just put on a different lens? How would the world look?’”

One of her responsibilities, then, is “creating a generation of critical thinkers, individuals who know how to seek out information, who can interpret the things that are said to them, and who come to their own conclusions”—not whether they should follow “this party or that party or the other party.

“It only matters what this new system produces,” she adds. “It could be perfectly designed and operate perfectly and still not produce that kind of graduate. And then you’d have to ask yourself, ‘What good did you do?’”

Now that Keleher has survived two major hurricanes, endured strikes and demonstrations and some pointed name-calling, been praised in high places and helped move a major piece of legislation across the finish line, I wonder if she’s finally starting to feel like a *Puertorriqueña*.

“There was a lot of talk about me not being Puerto Rican when I came in,” she says. “But I’m hopeful that at some point I’ll receive an adoption certificate.”