

Amanda Rivera Response to Chairman Grijalva's Question

The Status of PROMESA: Lessons Learned Three Years Later

Would defining essential public services help improve the quality of life of children in Puerto Rico? Please explain why or why not.

The extent to which defining essential public services would help improve the quality of life of children in Puerto Rico is complex, and will greatly depend on the way in which these essential public services are defined.

On one hand, including public education as an essential service, could help ward off further cuts from the public school system- K-12 and the university. Several studies have found a link between per pupil spending and positive student outcomes, especially for students from low-income backgrounds. These investments are deemed to be more effective if they are directed towards specific elements- such as reducing class size- and are focused on supporting instruction and other direct services for students.

However, it should be noted that while education is an important variable in children's wellbeing, their opportunities to thrive and leave poverty are a product of other variables beyond the education system. Children's development is affected by a host of different systems interactions, which include the family, the school, the broader community, and even the broader economic and cultural context (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Moreover, as research has proven, broader economic factors such as poverty- as defined by household income- which in the case of Puerto Rico is pervasive to the majority of the child population- can have a negative impact on educational outcomes, cognitive development health, emotional well-being, and child welfare.

The definition would then need to include services that impact parents, grandparents taking care of children, child care and early childhood programs, workforce development programming, mental health, social work and safety nets. If these other services and programs, which are not usually considered essential, are not included, they then run the risk of deeper cuts.

Other ways to look after children's wellbeing, especially the issue of child poverty, is to better define economic growth so that it includes social development and the reduction of child poverty. In this way, the fiscal plan would be obliged to provide for investments to reduce child poverty. This would include a broader range of programs and services, that could be inclusive of education.

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