

REMARKS BY THE GOVERNOR OF THE
COMMONWEALTH OF PUERTO RICO
HON. RAFAEL HERNANDEZ COLON
AT THE NATIONAL GOVERNORS' ASSOCIATION

FEBRUARY 25, 1990

THE HYATT REGENCY

WASHINGTON D.C.

It is with great pleasure that I have the opportunity to be with you today and talk about education. Setting a course for educational excellence is indeed an appropriate topic for thoughtful discussion among the Governors.

At the recent Education Summit -- and its follow-up meeting in December -- the Governors were able to define some broad guidelines for American education. Yet, as you well know, we must continue to work on this critical area. We must not only define broad goals, but find the resources to implement them.

Such a task is particularly challenging in this area of fiscal constraints. All too often it seems that both in Puerto Rico and here on the mainland U.S. our resources are dwindling just as our challenges are on the rise.

In Puerto Rico we have long been committed to bring about a change in education. Five years ago we began to press for education reforms and we continue those efforts today. We have taken many steps and committed a great amount of our budget to upgrade the physical plant, build new schools and

ensure the basic teaching materials, such as blackboards, desks, and books. Some of the reforms that we have already implemented include innovative programs to fight drop-out rates among our students; revision of the school curriculum; the development of critical thinking and the teaching of values; new recreational and educational alternatives outside of class hours; the establishment of the Study and Assured Employment Program. We have also worked to instill commitment and creativity among teachers backing them up with continuous education and salary increases, and rewarding quality and innovation with awards and bonuses, such as the Bonus for Perfect Attendance --which will be awarded for the first time this summer.

Our efforts at reform are already bearing fruit: two schools -- the Angela Cordero Bernard school in Ponce, and the Benito Cerezo high school in Aguadilla -- have received the prize for excellence from the Department of Education. This

award identifies these schools as two of the best in the United States.

Yet we also know that we must continue the process of improving our education far beyond the point we have achieved.

Our Education Reform Commission has prepared a bill soon to be submitted to the Legislative Assembly. This new law updates our educational policy; defines its objectives; restructures the system for better management; updates the curriculum; fosters quality by emphasizing innovative methods, media and research for teaching; links education with the business world; and consolidates and rationalizes the numerous administrative initiatives of the last five years.

Let me just outline some of the specific changes included in the legislation that I am proposing.

* It will set new educational standards by requiring the testing of students who complete the third and fourth grades of primary school, and the ninth grade of elementary school, before they are

allowed to pass on to a higher grade. These tests will examine the ability and skills of students in thinking, in math and in subjects of general education. Remedial education and tutorial instruction will be offered to those who are unable to meet test standards.

* It creates an evaluation system for teachers and establishes the "Teaching Path," an incentive system designed to keep the best teachers in the classroom.

* It transfers to the School Districts the funds for teaching materials, equipment, maintenance, repairs and other such costs that are now concentrated centrally.

* It requires every public school in Puerto Rico to be accredited every five years by the general education board.

* It creates a Center for Educational Research and Innovation.

* It establishes the school as the basic unit of the system and equips it with new decision-making authority, expanding the participation of teachers,

educational programs until they are proven successful. At the point, they will be financed by the government's general fund.

In Puerto Rico, we will commit the income from the first year of the Education Trust Fund to completely update and rebuild the physical resources of our school system.

As many of you may know, I oversaw the government purchase of the Puerto Rican telephone industry in 1974. At that time, telephone service in Puerto Rico was disastrous. The telephone system was owned by a company that was unwilling to provide quality affordable service; that increased prices unfairly; and that refused to invest in the telecommunications infrastructure necessary to meet our needs of the time.

It was clear that something had to be done -- and in 1974 we purchased the company from its private owners for \$165 million. At that time our challenges were clear: to build a telephone system that provided increased access at affordable rates, and that was both efficient and modern.

Today, however, the challenges that we faced in 1974 are very different than the challenges we face now. As we stand on the edge of a new era -- and era of technology and information -- the needs of yesterday must give way to the needs of today. The initiative I have proposed is quite simple: the transformation of an asset of the state that we have built over the past 16 years into one that directly helps the Puerto Rican people meet the challenges of today and tomorrow.

The phone company that we bought in 1974 for \$164 million is now worth several billion dollars. We can use this enormous resource to create the Education Trust Fund and to invest in our education and our future.

We hope this fund will enable us to bring dramatic changes in education we need. We hope to render our children the right education so that they can achieve the ability to think critically, clearly, and quickly; to develop innovative ideas and products; and to understand complex issues will be essential if we wish to remain competitive in

the international economy and raise the standard of living of our citizens.

This shall be our legacy to future generations, our investment in the most precious resource of all; the Puerto Rican people.

* * * *

FUNDACION

BIBLIOTECA

RHC

