THE SECRETARY OF EDUCATION

 WASHINGTON, DC 20202

June 7, 2022

The Honorable Eliézer Ramos Parés

Secretary of Education

Puerto Rico Department of Education

P.O. Box 190759

San Juan, PR 00919-0759

Dear Secretary Ramos Parés:

Congratulations on your confirmation as Puerto Rico’s Secretary of Education. Now more than ever, stable leadership is needed to carry out the Puerto Rico Department of Education’s (PRDE) vision to keep schools open and deliver high-quality instruction for students, and I believe your confirmation is an important first step toward this goal.

The extraordinary funding available through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations (CRRSA) Act, and the American Rescue Plan (ARP) Act creates a tremendous opportunity for PRDE to reset education in Puerto Rico that must not be missed. In addition, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) stands ready to support the repair and reconstruction of school infrastructure throughout the island. Equally important, the U.S. Department of Education (Department) is newly committed, under my leadership, to help Puerto Rico make major strides toward ensuring all students have equitable access to a high-quality education.

Since its launch in September 2021, the Puerto Rico Education Sustainability (PRES) Team has worked with education stakeholders throughout the island, including the PRDE, to assess how the Department can be most helpful in recovery efforts. One concrete result of this collaboration is a comprehensive technical assistance plan, which we are providing to you today, to better support your system’s needs.

At the same time, we must work together to address deeply rooted systemic issues that continue to negatively impact the effective delivery of education services to the students of Puerto Rico. While we have made progress in working through some of the issues identified in previous agreements between the Department and PRDE, more work remains. To maintain this momentum while supporting your leadership through implementation of the forthcoming technical assistance plan, the Department is developing a new Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that will aim to address root causes of persistent issues that undermine the effective operation of Puerto Rico’s education system. This will require continued collaboration between the Department and the PRDE along with input from external stakeholders through public listening sessions over the coming weeks.

Additionally, please note the following time sensitive issues regarding the timely obligation of Federal funds:

1. The deadline for obligating CARES Act funds, including the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER I) and Governor’s Emergency Education Relief Fund (GEER I), is September 30, 2022. We are concerned by PRDE’s delay in using an estimated $60 million to provide the full range of equitable services to private school students and teachers. These funds must be obligated by September 30, 2022, and liquidated 120 days thereafter. The Department does not have authority to extend the period of availability of the CARES Act funds, and if PRDE is unable to obligate funds for purposes of providing equitable services by September 30, 2022, it still is responsible for providing those services, possibly with non-Federal funds.
2. We believe that to the extent PRDE has been successful in spending CARES Act funds, it has been through pre-existing contracts; however, we are concerned that it continues to be challenging to implement new contracts through the existing procurement process.

These issues negatively affect the short-term needs of schools and students and limit Puerto Rico’s ability to ensure the COVID relief funds are used efficiently and effectively to address the impacts of the pandemic and help ensure a high-quality education for all of your students. We encourage you to use all available resources at your disposal in an effective and timely manner to facilitate the movement of available funds. The PRES Team stands ready and available to assist as needed.

Thank you for all you do to advance the educational needs of students in Puerto Rico.

Sincerely,

/s/

Miguel A. Cardona, Ed.D.

U.S. Secretary of Education

cc: Jesus Gonzalez Cruz, Undersecretary of Administration, PRDE

Naitzabes Martinez Gonzalez, Director for the Office of Federal Affairs, PRDE

Noelia M. García Bardales, Chief of Staff, Office of the Governor

Carlos M. Yamin Rivera, Deputy Chief of Staff, Office of the Governor

Carmen Feliciano, Executive Director, Puerto Rico Federal Affairs Administration