2012 STATE OF THE STATE ADDRESS

Luis G. Fortuño
Governor of Puerto Rico

The Capitol
San Juan, Puerto Rico
February 22, 2012

IMPROVING OUR PRESENT, ENSURING OUR FUTURE

Madame Speaker of the House of Representatives, Mr. President of the Senate, Members of the Legislative Assembly, Justices of the Supreme Court, Mayors, Mr. Secretary of State and other officials of the Government of Puerto Rico, Honorable Raúl Yzaguirre, Ambassador of the United States to the Dominican Republic and other officials of the Federal Government, distinguished guests...

...brother and sister Puerto Ricans.

Our grandparents spent four years building this beautiful Capitol Building. El Morro Fortress took their forebears more than two centuries to build.

Seven artisans from the town of Moca needed more than a year to sow the curtain of the Raúl Juliá Theater at the Puerto Rico Museum of Art. It took painter Francisco Rodón 10 years to paint a portrait of Don Luis Muñoz-Marín, and he spent several more painting a portrait of Don Luis Ferré.

Roberto Alomar waited 43 years to reach the Major League Baseball Hall of Fame. And it took Puerto Rican astronaut Joseph Acabá 42 years to reach outer space.

For a typical Puerto Rican student, graduating from high school takes 12 years. Obtaining a Master’s degree at the university...another six.
And for a Puerto Rican Mom or Dad, to raise, educate and form a family...to turn your sons and daughters into upstanding men and women...takes a whole lifetime, because the responsibilities of a good Mom or Dad never end.

The best goals take time in life.

But brother and sister listening to me at home: we Puerto Ricans can achieve absolutely anything we set out to do. There is no goal we cannot reach. All we have to do is convince ourselves we want to achieve it.

Patience attains everything. And the spirit to excel of Puerto Ricans can achieve anything.

The highest goals...those that represent the greatest challenges...take more time, effort and perseverance. But they also bring more satisfaction.

And you should be quite satisfied with what you have achieved these past three years. Because you have been able to move Puerto Rico in the right direction. You know that we did what needed to be done...and you have told us to continue moving forward.

While people in other countries around the world continue to suffer because their leaders have not taken the steps that are necessary to straighten things out, in Puerto Rico we are already once again on the path to progress. And thanks to you, we are starting to feel better...

Today it pleases me to reaffirm that, although we are going to continue working to achieve the goals that still remain, Puerto Rico’s situation is much better than what it was when you decided to change course....that things are going to continue to get better this year...and that our people are now confident that our worst days are behind us, and Puerto Rico looks once again to the future with hope.

That during the last two years —while in the rest of the United States home sales still haven’t recovered— 27,500 families here in Puerto Rico have achieved their dream of owning a home...thanks to the incentives we made available through our Impulso a la Vivienda housing initiative.

That when you plan your shopping, you feel more confident that our economy is improving...as shown by increases in retail and auto sales...

That for two straight years, Puerto Rican hands have sold more of our products beyond our shores...as shown by the sharp increase in exports in 2010 and 2011, when they reached their highest level in history...
That with the dedication and effort of Puerto Rican workers, our small and medium-size businesses are competing and succeeding, as demonstrated by nine consecutive months of declining bankruptcies...

Moreover, that our entrepreneurs are feeling more confident about establishing new businesses and creating jobs, as demonstrated by the increase in the number of new corporations being registered, for three straight years in a row, and that in 2011 it reached its highest point in history...

That in spite of an uncertain global economic environment, our manufacturing sector shows clear signs of recovery, expanding in 13 of the last 19 months...

That last year we saw the first positive news for the construction industry...

That the men and women that put Puerto Rico’s best face to the world do indeed Do It Better…in a tourism industry that last year showed positive growth in all of its principal indicators, with more visitors, more flights, more cruise ship passengers and more full rooms in hotels and small inns...

And all of this growth has resulted in more Puerto Ricans being able to earn an honest living…more men and women are finding jobs and together, we are creating jobs and bringing unemployment down.

Last year, the total number of employed Puerto Ricans increased for the first time since February 2007. While countries like Greece and Spain struggle with unemployment rates of 21% and 23%, here, in seven out of the last nine months, we have been able to consistently bring unemployment down, ending the year with an unemployment rate of 13%, down from 15%...

And although we can feel satisfied as a result of the many things we have accomplished together in such a short amount of time, brothers and sisters, what’s important is that we focus on the challenges that are yet ahead. We need to stay the course, and we cannot risk changing course. And we will not give up…we will keep fighting until every Puerto Rican feels the security of having a decent job with which to earn a living.

Puerto Rican brothers and sisters, we have begun to move in the right direction. In recent days we saw in all the newspapers the announcement that this past December, for the first time since March 2006 —when the previous administration closed the government and provoked the longest economic recession in our history— the economy of Puerto Rico finally entered into positive terrain. And the consensus among the most respected economists is that this growth will continue in the months ahead of us.
I do not have the slightest doubt that that will be the case…and that history will forever remember the deed you have achieved…that after six years of effort and perseverance, in December 2011 you were able to put an end to the economic depression that weighed us down since 2006.

This progress does not occur just by chance. It is the result of what we have been doing together for the past three years. It is what is achieved by those who have the courage and the disposition to do not what is easy, but what is right. It is the result of good ideas put into practice by people who don’t give up. With the support of this Legislative Assembly, you and I have spent three years rebuilding Puerto Rico…

Saving the good name of Puerto Ricans in the world markets, elevating our credit rating from the brink of junk status to the highest ranking we have had in 35 years…thus saving tens of thousands of jobs here and protecting the value of your home, your IRA and savings accounts, along with those of tens of thousands of Puerto Ricans, from what would have been a collapse if Puerto Rico had gone bankrupt…

Strengthening through “Mi Salud” the health care system upon which 1.6 million Puerto Ricans depend, including 180,000 citizens to whom we have given back the right that had been taken away from them…

Rebuilding, restoring and repaving our roads in the mountain region, and throughout the rest of the Island…

Investing in flood control projects in communities throughout Puerto Rico…Finishing the Dos Hermanos Bridge in San Juan…finishing Route 66 to Rio Grande…turning into reality the Metro Urbano, which will connect people in Bayamón, Toa Alta and Toa Baja with San Juan…and developing Bahía Urbana, Trocadero and Diverplex…among many other projects…

Building more than 100 Schools for the 21st Century, at least one in each municipality…so that our children are not only able to compete and succeed in life…but also reach the highest goals they set for themselves…and do so as men and women of good character, who practice their values and give back to their homeland.

Improving the quality of water for 750,000 Puerto Ricans…and developing the renewable energy projects that Puerto Rico needs, such as wind, solar, biomass, hydroelectric and waste recovery…and advancing our goal of using natural gas, to reduce our costly dependence in oil, which does so much damage to both our wallets and our health…
Improving the quality of life of more than 160,000 children and teenagers through sports programs such as Open Courts, the School Athletic League, the Church League and Playing for Your Health...and giving new hope for health and life to more than 30,000 senior citizens through the Exercise Plaza program held throughout the Island...

Making life easier for, and saving time for, thousands of citizens who expect and deserve a more agile and efficient government when they seek the services they need. Today, 120 of those services can be accessed from the comfort of your home through PR.GOV, including obtaining your vehicle license so you can get a sticker for it without having to get in line at a government agency...

Promoting and enabling new investments, new businesses and new sources of job creation...like LGS Global, which will hire 100 engineers from our universities; International Meal Company, which will generate 1,200 jobs; Rock Solid, an information technology company that will add 85 jobs to their operations; and MM Manufacturing with 325 jobs in their clothing and accessories manufacturing facility in Lajas...an investment of $25 million and more than 1,780 jobs...and that’s just the four operations we inaugurated this month! Altogether, since the beginning of our administration, more than $1 billion in new investment and 15,000 new jobs in businesses that are investing and expanding here, because they trust in the change that you have achieved.

And leaving more money in the pockets of our people...Yes, that's the meaning of the Tax Reform through which we’re cutting everybody’s taxes in half, leaving an average of over $1.2 billion per year in the pockets of Puerto Rican workers, as well as zero tax obligation for those who earn $20,000 a year or less, the $400 annual relief for seniors for life, the $1,500 personal exemption for our veterans, and the $600 increase in the earned income credit to promote employment.

The question facing every one of us is very simple: do we continue moving in the direction of improvement, progress and opportunities, or do we return to the path that led us to the crisis from which we have worked so hard to get out?

If we want to demand more from ourselves and make the dream of a better Puerto Rico come true, we cannot go back. Your family deserves better. And I repeat: even though we have plenty of reasons to be proud of what we've accomplished these past three years, we all have to focus on the challenges ahead...because you don’t give up, and neither do I.

But let there be no doubt that we have put Puerto Rico on the right path...thanks to you.

We have straightened out our finances and saved our credit...we did it.
We are putting an end to the economic depression they left us...yes.

We're generating more opportunities for steady employment for all...with your help.

We're rebuilding our roads and highways throughout Puerto Rico.

We've improved and extended Mi Salud...undoubtedly.

We're securing the future of your children with the schools they deserve...of course...

We've lowered taxes for everyone, and we're leaving More Money in Your Pocket...promised and delivered.

We are going to continue moving forward, because we cannot put at risk the progress that together we have achieved. Don’t have the slightest doubt. Because you don’t give up, and neither do I.

We still have a lot of work ahead of us, but we cannot allow the usual cast of critics to rob you of the achievements that together we have accomplished these past three years. Critics who, no matter how big and how clear the truth may be, if it is spoken by the government, they refuse to recognize it. People who never stop insisting that everything is wrong, and that nothing is ever done right. People who say all administrations are the same. People who say that you can’t and that Puerto Rico has no future.

To those critics we say: "No sir, not all administrations are the same...the differences are there...some administration have taken us on the wrong path and others on the right path...some took us to the brink of bankruptcy and others, we’ve had the knowledge, the experience and the courage to move Puerto Rico forward."

They increased bus fares...we did not, zero increases in bus fares...and we lowered the Urban Train fares...

They increased toll fares...we did not, zero increases in toll fares...

They raised vehicle license fees and now we’re returning that money to the People...

They imposed the Sales and Use Tax and increased your taxes...we’ve lowered taxes for everyone...
They raised water rates...we did not, zero increases in water rates...and we eliminated the rate increase they enacted before they left...

They didn’t do anything to lower your electricity bill... while we’re working hard to change from oil to natural gas and renewable sources, in order to achieve the lower your electricity bill you need...

We Puerto Ricans can do it...you don’t give up, and neither do I...and Puerto Rico has a bright future.

Public Safety

Now, let me do something governors don’t usually do when they step out here to render an account for their actions. I want to talk to you about an area that concerns all Puerto Rican families alike. An area in which I recognize that despite the enormous efforts we’ve made, the resources we’ve dedicated and the important accomplishments we’ve achieved, we still have a lot to do...and that’s the area of public safety.

I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again today: no one —least of all myself—can feel satisfied with the level of violence and lack of security that continues to affect our families and our communities, particularly the number of murders. Violence should have no place in our society...much less the kind that ends up depriving other human beings of their lives. That’s why we’re not going to give up...we’re not going to surrender our communities and our homeland to criminals who have no respect for our values.

It’s often said that all of us are victims of violence and crime. And it’s true. It’s true that, as a society, we all suffer this onslaught. But it’s not the same to be a witness as to be a victim. It’s not the same reading about a murder in the newspaper than feeling in your own flesh the loss of a loved one at the hands of a criminal. Just ask Evelyn Muñiz, who is with us here tonight. She’s the widow of Sergeant Abimael Castro Berrocal, who last month gave his life while fulfilling his duty to protect us all.

When faced with an event such as this, we express our solidarity... it’s true. But beyond expressing our condolences or making a statement to the media... what are we really doing to keep this from happening again?

What are each and every one of us doing to fight crime and build safer communities? If the Police is asking us for help to solve a crime, what kind of solidarity are we showing with Evelyn Muñiz...and so many other victims of crime...if instead of calling 343-2020, visiting www.3432020.com, or using the
Basta Ya, Puerto Rico application on our cell phones, what we do is look the other way or remain silent?

Real solidarity with Evelyn and her children John, Perla and Nashaly…and with thousands of crime victims…the real way to honor Sergeant Castro and his family’s supreme sacrifice…is to begin talking honestly about the problem and not using it as a platform to give a political speech. Our public safety problem and the tragedy of its victims are too serious and too profound to try getting rid of them through simplistic solutions…let alone indulge in politicking with them. Because the truth is that the safety of our families is not a matter of colors.

Any effective solution to the problem must begin with a realistic recognition of its true causes; an honest admission of the efforts and resources we’ve assigned thus far; an honest recognition, yes, of the results and accomplishments achieved thus far; and of course, an honest recognition of what yet remains to be done.

But brother and sister Puerto Rican listening at home, the first thing we have to do is put a stop to the constant, demoralizing and destructive attack against the Police. These men and women who risk their lives every day to protect ours deserve a lot more than our condolences to their families when one of them falls in the line of duty. Our police officers, all of them, from the youngest cadet to the most senior officer in the Force, deserve our respect, our gratitude and our support. They have mine and I know they have yours. And I would like to recognize the police officers and their families who are with us tonight…

These are the heroes who for three consecutive years have reduced by 10% Type 1 crimes like murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, breaking and entering, illegal appropriation and vehicle theft. And I must add…this month of February is the fourth consecutive month that we’re seeing the number of murders go down in comparison to last year.

It’s not about claiming victory… it isn’t! Even if some day we reduced murders to just one a year, even one would be one too many. But each murder we reduce is a gift of life for a Puerto Rican family.

The progress that we’ve achieved together has not been by chance, but rather it has been the result of all the initiatives we’ve put in place since day one as part of our Public Safety Plan.

Initiatives such as Strike the Drug Sales Point, Strike the Drug User, Group of 100 and the joint Strike Forces, between state and federal law enforcement agencies, which have produced, since they started, 6,000 arrests—with probable cause findings in 95% of the cases—the dismantling of over 400 drug
sales points, as well as the confiscation of hundreds of firearms, millions of dollars in cash and huge amounts of drugs...in addition to the dismantling of the criminal organizations of Ángelo Millones, Junior Cápsula and all the other notorious drug traffickers that our Police Department has taken off the streets and put behind bars.

Initiatives such as entering into a Memorandum of Understanding with the Federal Government in order to have all individuals accused of violent crimes using weapons prosecuted in Federal Court, which has already given outstanding results in only three months...with 120 criminals off the streets.

Initiatives such as inspecting all cargo containers in order to stop drug and weapon smuggling through the Port of San Juan; we've done this despite the fact that some tried to stop this initiative in court...and now they say it's a good idea...

Initiatives such as our efforts to get the Federal Government to allocate more resources to fight drug trafficking along the Caribbean border. Everyone now recognizes what we first pointed out three years ago...our Island is at the center of drug trafficking that’s moved from Mexico to the Caribbean because of the amount of resources the Federal Government has allocated to fight that traffic on the Mexico border. It’s about time the Federal Government pay the same attention to Puerto Rico, the Caribbean border.

On the other hand, it wouldn't be fair to demand that our police officers fulfill their heroic mission without giving them the tools they need. That's why, from the beginning of our administration, we have allocated more than $48 million to purchase equipment, patrol cars, bullet-proof vests, technology, and other tools to help them do a better job.

And yes, for the first time in years, we are doing justice by our police officers. First, by adjusting their salaries so that each member of the Police Department receives the salary he or she should be earning in accordance with his or her position. And, second, by giving all of them a $1,200 annual raise. Through these two measures, this year we will have increased the total compensation of our police officers an average of $3,313 per year, per officer...with those officers with the smallest raises receiving at least an additional $1,200 per year.

And if you'll allow me, I’d like to clarify: this is another example of the terrible consequences of the simplistic, opportunistic and partisan political attitude of those who think that fighting crime is stepping out in front of a microphone and promising anything and then failing to keep that promise. That is exactly what some of our predecessors did when they stood in this very place and announced that they were going to give the Police a raise, while knowing all
the while that they were not going to do it because they didn't have the resources to do it. That day, they got a round of applause...but they didn't fulfill their pledge. They said they were going to authorize a raise, and they never did. Now, years later, it has been up to us to correct the injustice done to our Police officers. And we’re doing it. As with everything else...we’re doing what needs to be done, in order to put the house in order and move forward.

In addition to allocating more resources, our Public Safety Plan also includes giving our men and women in uniform other kinds of tools to make them not only better police officers, but also better public servants and better citizens.

Because the success of their efforts to provide security for you, your family and your community doesn’t only depend on their material resources. It also depends on the extent to which they fulfill their mission to protect you by following the highest ethical, professional and constitutional criteria.

For over a year now, with the assistance of an outstanding team of specialized advisors, the Police Department has been carrying out the most comprehensive reform process in its history, revising and implementing new policies and practices in all its critical areas of operation.

As a result, our Police Department already has one of the most modern use of force protocols in the entire United States. In less than a year, more than 16,000 of our 17,000 policemen and women have been trained on this protocol, and we will soon complete training the entire police force. We are also establishing the necessary supervisory structures to ensure strict compliance with this new protocol.

What’s more, we are establishing mechanisms for reviewing every single use of force incident, in order to ensure that force is only used appropriately and responsibly, as warranted by each particular situation.

We’re also fulfilling the commitment we made, as part of this reform, to award promotions by merit, not favoritism...such as to the more than 500 officers we’re promoting to sergeant because they demonstrated in examinations that they are qualified for the position. And we'll continue to do so in the coming months, when we administer the examinations for second lieutenant, first lieutenant and captain.

This reform isn’t about underrating the Police Force. On the contrary, it's all about enhancing and improving it. I truly believe that an upright, professional Police Force, that protects the civil rights of everyone, will be trusted by everyone. And precisely because of that, it will be more effective and successful
in fighting crime and providing you and your family security. This is simple: a better Police means a safer Puerto Rico.

The reform to improve our Police Department is a comprehensive process that requires the commitment and participation of everyone...along with some patience as well. That’s why I’m asking you again to give the Police your support. I don’t give up, and neither do they...I’m committed to this reform ... and our police officers are, too. I’m sure they will also be able to count on your support.

Our fight for your security goes beyond allocating more resources to the Police. We have also approved legislation to give district attorneys more tools for prosecuting criminals.

We’ve amended criminal procedure rules so that judges have to order electronic monitoring devices for persons accused of murder, drug trafficking, selling firearms and domestic violence...which not only guarantees better supervision of the accused, but greater peace of mind for victims...

We’ve created a compulsory registry to combat the use of prepaid phones by criminals, who previously used them with impunity to commit crimes and extort money from citizens.

We’ve revised our criminal procedure rules to make more effective use of the biological evidence we find in the DNA of criminals.

We’re going to make it a crime to fire a weapon from a motor vehicle, and we’re also going to increase prison terms for the cowards who put firearms in the hands of minors so that they’re the ones who commit the crimes. We’ll do this through the new Criminal Code, which will impose longer sentences against criminals, and which I will sign into law as soon as both legislative bodies approve it. I want to thank the leadership of both the Speaker of the House and the President of the Senate for their commitment to making this new Criminal Code a reality.

There’s no doubt in my mind that this legislation will greatly benefit our district attorneys when they’re prosecuting criminals. But we have to do more. We have to be more effective processing the assassins that we arrest. Those who commit the horrific crime of depriving another human being of his or her life are going to jail. And the families of their victims need the assurance that comes from knowing that justice will be done.

That’s why today I’m announcing that during this session, I will be presenting legislation to provide additional tools to law enforcement agencies as well as to
the Judicial Branch, so that by working together we become more effective in prosecuting and convicting murderers who cut short the lives of our fellow citizens and rob all of us of our peace.

By establishing specialized courtrooms in all judicial regions to hear murder cases in the speediest and most efficient way possible...so that they don't go through unnecessary delays due to judges' busy schedules...and so that victims' families don't have to wait long to see justice.

Amending criminal procedural rules for quicker processing of cases and to permanently deny bail for those accused of murdering police, private guards, prosecutors and other law enforcement officers, when they violate the conditions set by their bail agreement...

Authorizing the Corrections Department, without first having to obtain a warrant, to arrest and create police records for offenders who violate the conditions of his or her probation. We must stop the recurrence of crime by those who abuse the system by committing more crimes while on probation...

Sponsoring legislation to establish guidelines that judges will have to follow when setting bail in murder cases, sexual assault cases, and violations of Law 54 that involve serious bodily injury, among others.

Ensuring that dangerous criminals cannot go free on an exceedingly low bail, and thus avoid the repetition of tragedies like that of Wanda Camacho in Ceiba, whose cowardly assailant was free on a bail of only $10,000, even though there was evidence he had threatened to kill his wife. This is something that angers me and all of our people...and we cannot allow it.

My commitment to the fight against domestic violence is unwavering. And we will not have compassion for criminals who threaten the physical safety and psychological well-being of our women. The victims of such tragedies deserve the assurance that the justice system will do whatever it takes to help them feel safe, so they can regain their peace of mind.

We will not allow any attacker to get a second chance to harm their victim. To accomplish this, we will promote legislation to deny bail and imprison any defendant in a domestic violence case who violates the conditions of electronic monitoring or has threatened their partner or former partner in any way. In this way, we will guarantee the peace and tranquility of domestic violence victims and their families, and we will help regain their trust in our system of justice.
And finally, we must give our judges at the state level one of the tools available to judges at the federal level, one that prevents an accused murderer from killing another victim while awaiting trial.

Puerto Rican sisters and brothers, we’ve all seen how when a crime is tried in federal court, the criminal goes to prison. One of the reasons for that is federal judges have the discretion to grant or deny bail to an accused murderer. It is about time that judges in Puerto Rico’s courts have the same discretion.

That’s why this year, I will submit legislation for our people to approve a constitutional amendment that will give judges in Puerto Rico the discretion to grant or deny the imposition of bail...but only and exclusively in cases where the defendant is accused of murder with intent, stalking or premeditation.

Unlike the 1994 proposal, which would have limited the entire right to bail, here the right to bail will be maintained. But only in cases of murder with intent, stalking or premeditation, will the judge have the discretion to grant or refuse bail, just like in the federal court.

To the majority and minority delegations in both houses...I ask you to favorably consider this bill so that we can consult the people on the third Sunday of August, along with the referendum on Legislative Reform.

Education, Values and Social Transformation

Brother and sister Puerto Ricans...this goal still lies ahead of us, to bring peace and security to your home...and every Puerto Rican home...and we can achieve it together. With dedication, effort and perseverance, I have no doubt we can achieve it.

One of the reasons that inspires my confidence is the gradual consensus we have achieved that the common denominator of all crimes of violence, including those that are caused by the illicit drug trade, is the deterioration of our social fabric. That’s why we must attack the problem at its root.

And so the vital importance - beyond that of the rest of the anti-crime initiatives - of our prevention initiatives. And prevention begins in our homes and our schools.

That’s why we have implemented the comprehensive Character Counts program...a values education platform that is integrated into the curriculum and school environment through workshops, exercises and projects designed to instill in our students the importance of Trustworthiness, Respect, Responsibility, Justice, Kindness and Citizenship.
Some 110,000 students and 10,000 teachers in 340 schools are already participating in the program...and the central aspects of the program have also been brought into government agencies, in order to promote both ethical behavior and optimal service by public employees.

And we are transforming Schools for the 21st Century...bringing into being a new educational opportunity that will change the lives of tens of thousands of our students, who will find in their own school the best reason to stay there and continue studying and participating in wholesome activities, including in extended schedules. And of course, all the schools for the 21st Century will be schools where Character Counts.

And we will promote Specialized Arts and Sports Schools...a groundbreaking initiative that, with its focus on artistic and athletic training, aims to capture the attention of students and expand their commitment to their education, exposing them to professional opportunities and careers in sports and the arts. This model has become such a powerful retention tool that we will expand it for next semester.

Unfortunately, not all our kids are in school...and we need to reach them all. Each dropout we rescue is a young man or woman we free from the clutches of crime. That's why we're focused on promoting initiatives to prevent and reduce school dropout rates...

Such as the Alliance for Alternative Education...a collaborative effort among five nonprofit organizations - ASPIRA, Proyecto Nacer (Project Birth), the Sister Isolina Ferre Centers, Nuestra Escuela (Our School) and PECES - which offer alternative education to 3,000 students in 44 municipalities, with an amazing 100% retention rate. And I would like to recognize the representatives of some of these organizations who are with us tonight.

Lady and gentleman legislators, here is a living example of how we can address the root causes of crime...of how we can make a difference in a problem as complex as school dropouts...and that nonprofit organizations - including not only the Alliance, but other programs like the Alcance Educational Program, the Education and Technology Institute and the National Guard's Teen Challenge – are able to do an outstanding job helping us in this mission.

That is why I will be submitting legislation to create the Enabling Act for the Development of Alternative Education in Puerto Rico, in order to recognize alternative education as a full-fledged current within our educational system, establish applicable public policy, quality assurance programs and allocate necessary funds.
In the same manner, on the government side of the equation, we shall establish a new School Retention Initiative...a joint effort between the Departments of Education, Family, Recreation and Sports, ASSMCA, the Office of the Women’s Advocate, municipalities and community and faith-based organizations...consisting of an early warning protocol and interventions with high-risk students, in order to both provide support for the family concerned and demand greater parental involvement and responsibility in the education of their children.

These initiatives will be joined to the accomplishments we’ve already attained in Education...starting with having taken the Department out of federal receivership.

As in the rest of the government, we put the house in order in Education. For the first time in years, the U.S. Department of Education praised the implementation, monitoring and proper use of federal funds in education, which means that the resources destined for the education of your children are reaching the classroom, where they belong.

We expanded the teaching resources for our children, granting tenure to some 4,300 teachers, most of whom came from the ranks of the hard-to-recruit category, and who had been waiting eight years for their tenure.

And finally, in response to the long-standing demand of their parents, we are doing justice by our Special Education students, through the appointment of almost 1,300 Teaching Facilitators, along with tenure for nearly 1,500 Student Service Assistants. These additional resources are already making a difference for thousands of special education students, substantially reducing the evaluation time to enter the program - with 97% having their assessments completed within 60 days, whereas before it could take more than a year - and reducing the time of the average student evaluation, to purchase the equipment the student needs, from 9 months to 75 days, among other accomplishments.

One area, nevertheless, in which we have to recognize that we need to redouble our efforts...is the area of bilingual education.

In the year 2000, the Department of Education had over 460 bilingual initiatives, 14 of them total immersion schools. Over the following eight years, those programs were totally abandoned and dismantled.

Today, there are only 35 schools that offer some type of bilingual education. That’s totally unacceptable. We must do much more. Speaking English is not a partisan political matter...it’s a matter for the present and future of our children.
Impeding the ability of our children and young people to communicate as perfectly bilingual citizens, in Spanish and English, is to impede their future.

That is why we shall be implementing a comprehensive plan known as Empowering Students for the 21st Century, in order to strengthen our academic offerings and reinforce the professional development of English teachers, as part of an initial pilot project in 35 schools, benefitting 10,000 students.

Moreover, in another 31 schools, we will implement a bilingual education program known as Bilingual Education for the 21st Century, focused on Kindergarten through 2nd grade. This program will benefit another 8,400 students in every school district.

And we will be complementing these offerings together with other initiatives aimed at helping every Puerto Rican child gain a full command of the English language.

Speaking and writing perfect English should not just be a privilege for children who attend private school...it should be a right for all our children. And to those who want to turn this into a partisan political issue, I’m telling you right now: don’t mess with the future of our children.

**Status**

Finally, this year you’ll have in your hands the power to decide the destiny of our homeland. For years, we’ve debated about the kind of relationship we want to have with the nation of which we are citizens. This debate has divided the Puerto Rican family, and continues to be an obstacle to our progress. And you know it’s time to solve it. No one can be satisfied with being a territory. Puerto Rico has been waiting for years for us, her children, to embrace a dignified and permanent alternative that will allow us to pass on to our children the Puerto Rico of progress and well-being we all deserve. And the time to do it is now!

**Puerto Rico does not give up**

Brother and sister Puerto Ricans...we are on the threshold of a new dawn.

We’ve had some difficult years, which have put to the test our perseverance and our spirit to overcome. But you have been able to find deep within yourself the determination to recover and move forward. You had the courage to stand up and set out once again in the right direction. You have said to the world that Puerto Ricans do not give up.
That unbreakable faith and indomitable spirit of Puerto Ricans to overcome brings to mind a quote from President Ronald Reagan that I’ll paraphrase:

“Sometimes in life, when things get difficult and we need to find support or sustenance in our own values or in a friend who can lend a hand, we find someone who reminds us what it means to be a good Puerto Rican.”

I met a good Puerto Rican...someone who taught me the meaning of not giving up.

When I was Resident Commissioner, I often visited the Walter Reed Military Hospital in Washington. I went alone, without the media, to privately do what I considered my duty: to encourage, thank and honor the men and women who lay there hospitalized after serving on the battlefront.

One day, the attending physician for Emmanuél Meléndez, whom I didn’t know, approached me to ask if I’d be willing to visit his patient, a Puerto Rican soldier who had been declared a hopeless case by his medical team, and who didn’t have much time left to live. I said, “Of course I will.” Then, alone with Emmanuél in his room—his body severely mutilated and his brain in a coma—with no hope that he could hear me, I did what any Christian would have done...I whispered into his ear how proud and thankful I was, as a Puerto Rican and as an American citizen, for his dedication and sacrifice in the defense of democracy and our Nation. And I said to him, “Don’t give up.”

Against all odds, during my next visit to Walter Reed, Emmanuél had not died. He was still in a coma, and I had the opportunity to do it again...to whisper in his ear words of pride, gratitude and encouragement: “Don’t give up.”

These visits were repeated several times.

Months later, his family asked me if I would agree to Emmanuel’s request of being the one to hang the Purple Heart around his neck. My surprise and happiness could not have been greater. Not only had Emmanuél recovered, he was also about to receive the recognition of a grateful nation. What’s inexplicable about the whole thing is that he had never met me, and his family never told him that I had been with him during his coma. But he never gave up ...and now Emmanuél devotes his life to teaching others not to give up.

Ladies and gentlemen, let me introduce you to a model of the perseverance and overcoming spirit of Puerto Ricans: Emmanuel Meléndez.

Brothers and sisters listening to me, here and in your homes...in the spirit of the best Puerto Rican values...let us thank God for his blessing...let us thank God for
our accomplishments and let us put all our determination on the road ahead of us…

In the overcoming spirit that raised Emmanuel from his coma…

In the enterprising spirit of our ancestors who built our historic patrimony…

In the industrious spirit of our lace makers of mundillo…

In the perceptive spirit of our artists…

In the enthusiastic spirit of our athletes…

In the conquering spirit of our scientists…

In the optimistic spirit of our students…

And in the hopeful spirit of every father and mother who teaches their sons and daughters the most authentic Puerto Rican values…

Let us go forward together, towards the glory the Creator has reserved for our homeland.

God bless you and God bless Puerto Rico.