

Proyecto Vimenti Years Two and Three
A Lesson in RESILIENCY

By Robin Lake and Silene Vargas Díaz

vimenti
[espacio
para el
desarrollo]

by Boys & Girls Clubs of Puerto Rico



2019-2021



Proyecto Vimenti, Puerto Rico's first public charter school, was founded to change the trajectory of students and families in one of the island's most economically depressed and isolated communities. Vimenti was launched under the umbrella of the Boys & Girls Clubs of Puerto Rico, (BG CPR), which brings fifty-three years of experience and a strong track record of securing funding and building the capacity of local sites to increase revenue for strategic initiatives.

BG CPR has been serving young people inside the Ramos Antonini Public Housing project for more than fifty years—the Ramos site has operated afterschool programs focusing on education, health, life skills, leadership development, and arts. Today, Vimenti serves more than 350 children annually.

After decades of work with local youth, BG CPR leaders realized that the community's families were locked into intergenerational cycles of poverty that made it nearly impossible for the young people they served to achieve upward mobility. They became convinced that they had to take a radically different approach: implementing a two-generation model that includes opening a school and related services as interlocking pieces to tackle education and poverty and to provide opportunities for children and their families. Vimenti is authorized and overseen by

Puerto Rico's Department of Education under Act 85, the education reform bill passed in March 2018 as an Alianza (charter) School.

In the 2020–21 school year, Proyecto Vimenti served children in kindergarten through third grades for a total of 126 students—twice the size since its founding. The school is also in the process of becoming a standalone organization— independent of BG CPR—with the mission of eradicating intergenerational poverty across Puerto Rico by creating hubs of economic, social, and educational opportunities throughout the island.

This paper documents lessons from Proyecto Vimenti's second and third full years of operation, which occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. Three previous papers documented the early start-up period. The goal of this paper is to provide transparency about results and share lessons learned of this first charter school in Puerto Rico and its unique two-generation model to serve vulnerable students and families to break generational poverty and promote economic mobility in Puerto Rico. The lessons from this unique effort are also relevant to school leaders throughout the U.S. and elsewhere.

The authors conducted structured interviews with more than a dozen members of the

Vimenti community, including parents, teachers, administrators, board members, and consultants. The investigation included:

- How did the school respond to the pandemic and what services were of most benefit to students and families?
- What are the student participation, engagement, and learning outcomes to date?
- What progress is the organization making to address intergenerational poverty?
- What support services do families feel are most relevant for the overall success of the family and academic achievement of the children?
- How have operations and finances evolved since opening? What adjustments have been made, lessons learned?
- What opportunities and barriers has the school faced in recruiting, training, and supporting teachers?
- How are the overall charter school funding and regulatory environments influencing the organization's ability to achieve its goals?
- What are the relevant lessons for future Puerto Rican charter schools and other schools interested in addressing intergenerational poverty and social-emotional learning?



The Three Pillars of Proyecto Vimenti

Vimenti operates with a clear and compelling hypothesis: to break the cycle of poverty, they must educate and give opportunities in social, education, and economic areas for both children and their parents. They looked at models abroad and met with think tanks and research centers dedicated to addressing poverty, such as the Aspen Institute and Ascend, and settled on a two-generation model that had been “studied and evidenced.” The basic idea is if educational, economic, socio-emotional development, and networking services are all provided to the child and the family at the same time, their poverty conditions will change.

Vimenti is a one-stop shop—families receive all the services they need in one place.

In the multigenerational education pillar, children receive a high-quality education. Vimenti hopes to create the same educational opportunities for their students that more advantaged students have: an academic curriculum but also enrichment opportunities, such as entrepreneurship, art, and extracurricular activities. At the same time, parents receive education through the employability program, career counseling, entrepreneurship program, and case management coaching. For example, if parents have not finished their studies, Vimenti helps them complete high school or continue postsecondary studies.

In the socioemotional pillar, case managers work on plans with the family and with the students,

then work socioemotional skills and integration into the curriculum. And as a unique aspect, health and wellness assessments and services are fully integrated into the school. All students are screened via the school’s Healthy and Ready to Learn program for vision, hearing, hunger, asthma, and other barriers to learning.

In the economic pillar, Vimenti provides tools for economic development for adults and children. Participants develop awareness and appreciation for work and create aspirations for their lives beyond a career. Students and adults alike are taught entrepreneurship, computer management skills, and learn English. Adults in the community come to Vimenti to receive services even if their children do not attend. Vimenti hopes these adults come to realize that this is the way to transform both children’s and adults’ opportunities in their community.

These three pillars are meant to work in concert to remove barriers to economic mobility and to effect what one teacher described as a “safe zone” for families. They know that they will have the support of their teachers, as well as the support of community health partners that will provide them with all the medical assistance they may need, an afterschool program where there are people helping them, and the support of social-emotional partners that look after well-being at home. As one teacher explained, “[The families] come here and it is like coming home for them. It is not, ‘I arrived at school,’ it is, ‘I arrived at my second home.’”

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Vimenti Conceptual Model

Our mission is to eradicate child poverty.

Our vision is to create an evidence-base model that provides support, skills, and experiences to our children and families in order to achieve economic security.



Programmatic Areas

1 EDUCATION
Vimenti school
Academic support
Post secondary

2 SOCIAL
Case management
Emotional intelligence
Health and wellness

3 Economic
Entrepreneurship
Carriers
Incubator

Metrics

Number of young people that complete post-secondary studies

Number of young people that obtain employment

Increase in family income

Increase in labor participation



OVERVIEW:

Proyecto Vimenti's second year of operation was off to a strong start. As our last reports described, over its first year and a half, Puerto Rico's first charter school made critical adjustments to its initial plans and doubled down on its ambitious theory of action. By attacking intergenerational poverty through economic opportunity, by providing intensive social and health supports, and by giving students access to the same quality of instruction and high expectations as Puerto Rico's most advantaged families receive, Vimenti hoped to prove that the lives of students and their families could be transformed, contributing to a robust Puerto Rican future economy and social structure.

During the first year and a half, the school encountered several bumps typical for new schools, including a major revamp to its curriculum, leadership shifts, and financial and regulatory challenges with the Puerto Rican Department of Education. Despite these challenges, Vimenti also demonstrated many early successes, as our earlier papers documented.

Just over six months into its second year, however, the COVID-19 pandemic abruptly closed schools across Puerto Rico by order of the governor. Puerto Rico eventually had perhaps the longest continuous closure of all schools in the U.S. Public, private, and charter schools remained online from March through May 2020, and the entire following school year—August 2020 through May 2021.¹

Vimenti's Pandemic Response: Students at the Center

Like most schools globally, having to shutter their doors and move to remote instruction was not something Vimenti anticipated or prepared for.

The school's initial response was to take care of immediate and urgent family needs, like food and economic support. Some community members were caring for elders and other people's children (sometimes ten to twelve in one home) so they could go to work but had no way to feed them. The school was able to step in during the pandemic—providing to the community more than 25,000 box lunches and nearly twice that many in 2019–20 during a time when other schools were shut down.

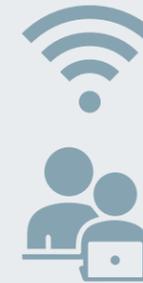
Health services and evaluations also continued through telehealth services pediatricians. Medical orders were sent to the laboratory to continue with the vision and hearing screenings.

To get a handle on family and community needs, Vimenti's social team immediately called families to understand their most pressing needs: who had a job, who had no job, who had lost it, who was at home, if there was connectivity. They then offered referral and follow-up services to families to help meet their economic and emotional needs and to assess how to best keep students safe, engaged, and learning.

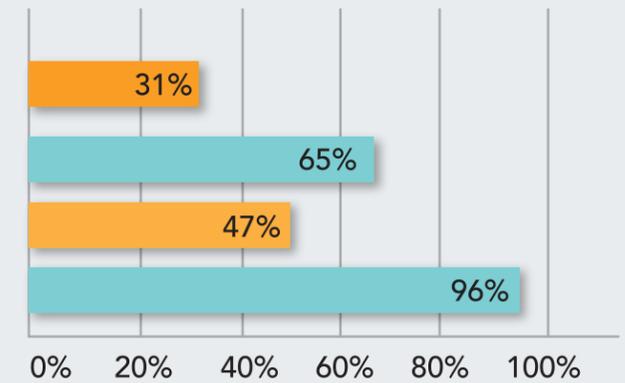
¹ The government did allow a small number of schools, including Vimenti, to open for several days during this period, but the schools were quickly shuttered again due to continued outbreaks.

VIRTUAL VIMENTI KEEPS MOVING FOR OUR KIDS, YOUTH AND FAMILIES

Family Needs 2019-2020 - Abril, 2019



Vimenti School parents that have lost jobs
 Vimenti School students without laptop/computer
 Vimenti School students without home internet access
 Vimenti School students with cellphone internet access



Services for Families 2020-2021



To Go Families Meals
 more than
25,000
 Box Lunches



1,796
 Health Services



3,079
 Parents follow up
 sessions with
 case managers



212
 Number of hours
 of training per
 staff



277
 Goals
 Achieved



56
 Number of hours
 meeting for
 the school faculty



38%
 Students in special
 education program

Approximately one-third of Vimenti families lost their jobs during the pandemic and they needed immediate and tangible help. The school established an emergency relief fund, through private donations, for all families. Vimenti distributed four rounds of stipends directly to families during the school year, totaling \$63,450 (approximately \$500 per student), to cover basic needs and the expenses related to staying home due to the pandemic. Families who contracted COVID and could not leave their home were supported with purchases delivered to their homes.

Within days of the shutdown, teachers and social workers began to reach out to students and their parents to simply establish lines of communication and started sending home paper packets to keep students learning. Teachers mainly tried to maintain connections with students and focused on supporting life skills at home like doing chores. According to Vimenti's data manager Gustavo Chico, more than 60 percent of Vimenti families did not have internet, and those that did had limited connection: "We had to figure out how we were going to reach our families and how we had to adjust to help them."

When it became clear the pandemic would not abate anytime soon, Vimenti was able to secure funding and sponsors to provide connectivity support for students and teachers: stipends for families, stipends for teachers to pay for internet at home, as well as accommodation and support as needed.

The school ordered iPads and launched a collaborative partnership with T-Mobile, which supported the school to secure wi-fi access for every student. Most schools in Puerto Rico were unable to order devices without a months-long approval process from the Department of Education, but luckily Vimenti had already been approved for iPad purchases from the U.S. Department of Education charter schools program.

By all accounts, the first few months of remote instruction were chaotic, but the school's commitment to continuous improvement and culture of adaptability carried them forward. By one teacher's account: "The first semester was a trial, to see how we are doing, what things we have to improve."

When it became likely, by the end of June 2020, that school would be remote again in the fall, Vimenti's teachers, their educational consultant, and school leaders huddled and, by the end of the school year, formulated a plan to prepare for remote instruction. During spring, while they waited for the iPads to arrive, they prepared. They settled on an online platform, Seesaw, and selected online reading and math programs.



Together they designed schedules and settled on a strategy to keep their young learners engaged and attentive over the course of the day and to personalize instruction as much as possible. They pared down the curriculum to home in on the most critical content, realizing they would not be able to cover everything deeply. Teachers spent a month in professional development focused on remote instruction, practicing delivering lessons Zoom. They went through different scenarios (What does it look like to engage students? To have parent communication?) and received feedback on virtual lessons.

Elizabeth Greninger, an educational consultant who has been working with Vimenti for more than two years, described how the school's previous work to engage teachers deeply in curriculum design and to center instruction around student and family needs paid off in this moment of crisis:

“ We have curriculum now, we just have to adjust our thinking and our methodology to a whole bunch of tools that none of us know. Like everyone, we were just figuring out what does Vimenti need and what's gonna support Vimenti? We were not trying to put too much on anyone: parents, teachers, or students. And trying to select a few strategic technological tools and making sure teachers felt comfortable with those tools.

The school set up tents and provided socially distanced parent training as well, since many families had no experience with iPads or the programs the school was planning to use.

When school restarted in August 2020, virtual learning was fully underway. The school day began with a morning meeting and then short blocks of instructional periods. In between periods, teachers worked with small groups of students or had them do independent work. According to Greninger, this amounted to approximately two and a half to three hours of “live” instruction a day for kids, and teachers taught five to six hours a day, substantially more live instruction than what most students in Puerto Rico, or even in other U.S. schools, received during remote instruction. On Fridays students were expected to work independently.

While no one felt that teaching remotely was ideal, teachers have embraced several elements of virtual instruction, such as small-group instruction that allowed teachers to target specific needs and skills and group students accordingly—a strategy they are now working to permanently incorporate into teaching. Vimenti also adapted the schedule to have teachers focus on one subject per day, another development they hope to retain going forward as teachers say it allowed them to better prepare and focus.

Principal Azalia Colón explained how technology will help the school achieve its long-term mission:

“ We have more contact with our community, as we were totally dependent on our parents connecting with our students. So, within all the terrible things about the pandemic, it has been very positive for us.” Operations director Lola Yglesias added, “Today is the pandemic, tomorrow it may be influenza, mycoplasma, a hurricane, an earthquake. So, we will always have a plan B so that students can connect.”



Social Supports

“ They support us as a family so we can help the children progress. [During the pandemic] they have been hand-in-hand with the family and given us support. They want to know if we have eaten, if we have problems or economic situations so they can help us.

-Vimenti parent

Online instruction was a major shift for the students, families, and even teachers at Vimenti. Many families did not have internet access, were not familiar with the technologies, and many were struggling with stress and disruptions caused by the pandemic and related hardships.

To address these needs, Vimenti’s social and economic pillars and support structures were essential. The school deployed case managers to check in on families with a directive: just connect, however you can. Whether by phone or home visit, case managers built on a previous foundation of relationships and trust to first make sure everyone was safe, including connecting families to pediatricians if needed. Second, they worked with family members who lost their employment because of the pandemic. And third, they supported student learning by ensuring families could connect to the internet and use the technology.

Attendance was a struggle for most schools during remote learning, especially among economically disadvantaged populations, but Vimenti reports surprisingly strong average attendance. The general attendance percentage rate for the entire year was 85 percent Mondays through Fridays.² A group of students was consistently absent from



classes, so the school made provisions to allow them to come into school to try to re-engage them. Still, more than 50 of Vimenti’s 126 students had been absent at least twice per month.

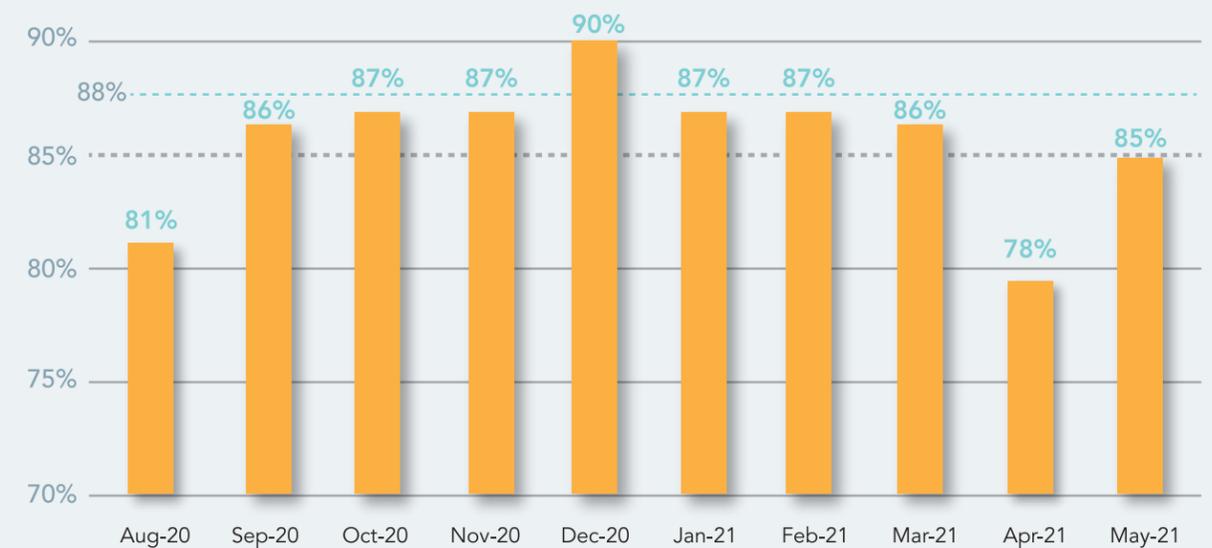
A Vimenti teacher noted how critical it was to engage with and support families so students could connect and learn:

“ We had many frustrated parents, they did not know how to do it and I had to enter their world to help them create a structure, a schedule that they could feel a little comfortable with. And not only with the parents, but with the grandparents, because there were times that it was the grandparents who connected them and it was more complicated.”



School Attendance 2020-2021

School Attendance Average



2021-22
School Attendance

- August 2021 80%
- September 2021- 84%

² Remote attendance was defined by student connection on Zoom in each time period. From August to December, students were expected to connect in at least three time periods, and were considered present if they connected in at least two time periods. From January to May, students were expected to connect in at least four time periods and were considered present if they connected in at least three time periods. On Fridays, students were considered present for asynchronous learning if they delivered the class exercises assigned by Seesaw.

Trauma-Informed Instruction

Before the pandemic, Vimenti was increasingly engaged in building their expertise in trauma sensitivity and social-emotional supports. The school was able to partner with the Child Health Fund through its Healthy and Ready to Learn program to provide four teacher trainings on how to identify and address trauma. At the request of teachers, they were able to offer a virtual class for students and families on emotional well-being before virtual learning officially began in August 2020.

Vimenti is also integrating a Trauma and Grief Program component in partnership with the Meadows Mental Health Policy Institute and funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. It includes methods and trainings designed for children who have gone through cumulative trauma, not just a single traumatic event.



What Enabled Effective Crisis Response?

Like all schools, Vimenti had many challenges and setbacks during remote learning, but the project exhibited remarkable responsiveness to families and a nimble and strategic shift to remote instruction.

This was in stark contrast to other Puerto Rican public schools, many of which did not move to remote instruction and left students without any meaningful instruction for eighteen months—longer for students whose schools had been closed for the earthquake and hurricanes.

This nimble and impressive response was enabled by a variety of factors. Vimenti's flexibility in being a charter school likely allowed for fast action, but the program's overall philosophy and mission, as well as investments in teaching and learning, seemed to be even more important. The trust and relationships Vimenti had built with families allowed them to engage quickly and effectively.

Executive Director, Bárbara Rivera Batista believes the key to Vimenti's ability to adapt is its relationships:

“ We believe that families are the center and we put in front the families and students needs to adapt and serve them better. The project is based on relations and having direct contact with families, students, and staff, with their reality and needs make the difference in the adaptation on front any crisis”

The ongoing commitment to data systems allowed Vimenti to quickly and accurately assess needs. And, importantly, prior work to engage teachers deeply and meaningfully in the curriculum shift they undertook in Year 2 meant that the school was prepared, when the time came, to work together quickly to shift to an online curriculum, to prioritize essential content, and to ensure the instruction was centered fully around individual student needs.

Data Manager Gustavo Chico believes it has been critical to diagnose where a family is when they

arrive at Vimenti—where the student is, what they know or do not know—to have a better planning process and help families mediate difficult processes: “Many of these families need government help or have special situations and do not know about the mechanisms, how to navigate the system. And many times they even get self-conscious or don't go because they don't have the tools to navigate. And we have to understand why it is important to work with both generations and give them that support, it is crucial. To work on that type of project that seeks to break with intergenerational poverty.”

More than anything, it seems as though Vimenti's culture of continuous improvement and commitment to data-informed response to student and family needs was central to their ability to adapt. As one interviewee told us, “The entire faculty at Vimenti are always adapting to the changes. They are up to the challenge, like, ‘Let's do it!’ If you do not have the ability to adapt, to do things at the moment on short notice, if you don't have that ability, you won't be able to work here.”



Lessons Learned

Progress on supporting teachers, hiring for fit

Since its founding, Vimenti has tried to hire the best teachers and has invested heavily in professional development. The school pays teachers more than most other schools on the island, public or private, provides a month of intensive professional development every June and allocates weekly team planning time. Under the guidance of Elizabeth Greninger, the educational consultant, the school revamped its curriculum and implemented a highly structured observation, feedback, and evaluation system:

For [teachers] to get a month-long PD in June is unheard of anywhere. For them to be training and working with their teams, yeah it's intense, but it's also the biggest gift you can give educators: time and the resource of knowledge. I do remind them this is special.

As a result of this support, teacher turnover at Vimenti is almost nonexistent and teachers feel a deep sense of ownership over the instructional program. To further refine the model and to ensure Vimenti teachers fully understand the school's unique approach and intense culture of continuous improvement, Greninger more recently helped the school refine its hiring process. In spring 2020, just as the pandemic was beginning, Vimenti began requiring applicants to do a lesson plan, get feedback on the plan, and incorporate the feedback into a demonstration lesson. This approach has allowed the school to more effectively find teachers who are not just experienced but who also want to adapt and grow. Greninger says teachers have responded in two ways. Some walk away saying, "Wow that was intense." And she tells them, "Yeah and that's how it's gonna be here." Other teachers they hired said, "I have never received this much support and guidance. I knew it was going to be intense, but you guys talk the talk."

Working within the realities of government

Pandemic response in Puerto Rico was often thwarted by slow or nonexistent supply. As a government Alianza/charter school, Vimenti was subject to procurement and supply chain realities of government. The government passed a rule requiring all purchasing to go through central procurement, creating a massive bottleneck in schools' ability to purchase supplies. Ordering books and technologies took many months. As one interviewee said, "Everything came to a halt."

Those realities have been complicated by a government in disarray due to recent controversies and resignations in the Puerto Rico Department of Education (PRDE). All of these factors have exacerbated an already challenging situation for Vimenti, the island's first charter school. Since opening, Vimenti has had to fight for full public "per-pupil" funding for its students and forcing it to use private funds to fill the gaps. During the 2019–20 school year Vimenti received \$3,325 per student from PRDE. In this last 2020–21 school year, it received \$3,241—less than half of what is published as PRDE's per-pupil budget of \$7,624.

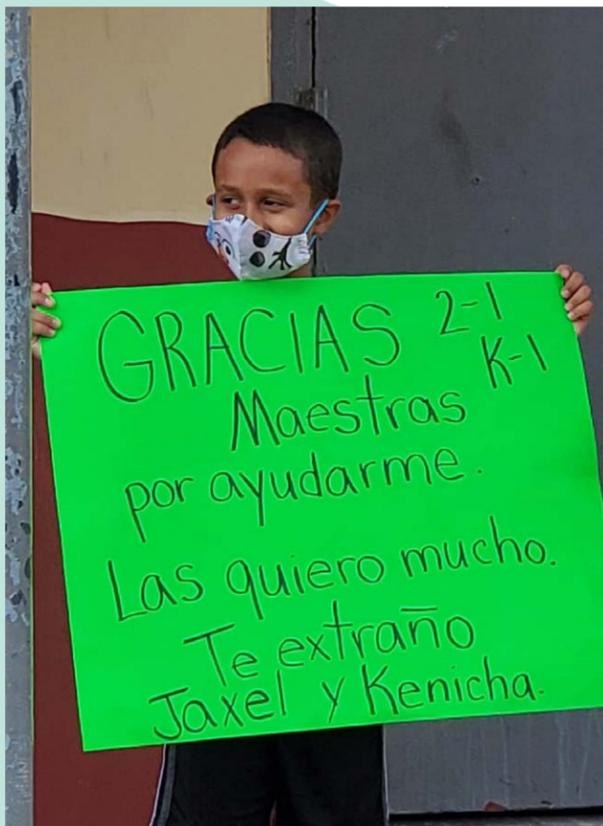
Vimenti did not receive those funds until May of 2021, near the end of the school year. Because it is not considered a public or private school, it did not receive federal CARES Act funds and it is not clear if it will receive ESSER funds.

The school does not receive direct funding for special education services and depends on PRDE to provide education services and other supports, which it failed to do initially despite the school's

large percentage of students who qualify for such services (38 percent as of the 2020–21 school year). To respond to student needs, Vimenti recruited a special education coordinator, a positive behavior therapist, case managers, and a nurse as part of their services. PRDE assigns a special education teacher depending on the number of students in the special education program, but Vimenti does not have control over hiring, selection, and evaluation of these personnel.

During the pandemic, these issues were exacerbated. Only three Alianza schools were in operation, compared to the hundreds of schools overseen directly by PRDE. Departmental turnover and no clear leadership commitment to the Alianza schools caused these schools to fall in between public and private rules and hampering the schools' ability to for example, acquire vaccines. Principal Colón has strong relationships and has worked to increase Vimenti's visibility and advocacy. However, as Yglesias, the director of operations noted, the school has a long way to go to ensure PRDE has all the facts and sees Vimenti as a public school on equal terms.

For the school leaders we interviewed, the frustration with [PRDE] is not about being slighted or misunderstood, it's about achieving sustainability and parity for their students. As one Vimenti leader put it, "If we cannot secure the appropriate funding that is needed to run and operate a schools, how are we going to close that gap?" You cannot sustain that on private dollars.



Leadership alignment

Since its founding, Vimenti has had two school principals in three years. Finding strong school leaders who share the project's very particular approach to instruction, understands the deep connection to addressing whole family needs, and is committed to working with high-needs children and families has been a challenge.

The school hired the current principal, Azalia Colón, in December 2019. The pandemic hit in March 2020, adding even more complexity to the job. The teachers, the director of operations, and the data manager appreciate the leadership and stability that Colón has brought, and for her experience and connections with PRDE. While the school is privileged to have so many outside

resources and consultants, teachers sometimes say they receive conflicting guidance, though they note the positive benefit of stable and well-connected leadership and multiple sources of feedback.

The school will have to continue to streamline leadership direction and, in the future, might consider developing school and instructional leaders from within to ensure consistency of leadership, mission, and culture. Leadership turnover has been hard on faculty. One teacher said, "It was uphill because sometimes the new director had a different vision than the previous one. It's like when the government changes every four years."

Integration across pillars, family engagement

The truly unique aspect of Vimenti is the three-pillar approach to addressing intergenerational poverty: education, social, and economic. While each is a powerful component, the school has struggled to seamlessly integrate them. A high priority for the school is to address communication issues that sometimes cause frustration and resentment between teachers and case workers over student attendance and family outreach.

Although overall attendance rates were reasonably high during the pandemic, a significant number of students are still not attending regularly, despite the school's outreach and efforts. Many of those families had to work during the pandemic, leaving the children to be supervised by someone who did not enforce attendance and learning. Other families were coping with multiple traumas and challenges. Family engagement has improved markedly in some teachers' views but is still the "Achilles heel" of the school. Teachers would like to see more tools and professional development

in the social and extracurricular areas, especially regarding engaging families on their children's education.

However, greater engagement with the community can also backfire. Calls home have doubled during the pandemic and that has upset some families because they can feel overwhelmed or annoyed by regular phone calls, emails, or other communication. Some of this can be avoided by better internal communication among staff, but some staff believe there should also be clearer communication with families about the school's approach before they enroll their child. They should understand, one staff person told us, "it is not a school, it is a project that wants to work with you so that you can improve yourself and show the next generations of your family that they can get ahead."

Building trust and listening to the community

The leadership team at Vimenti—teachers, and case managers—all spoke thoughtfully of the importance of building and maintaining trust in the community, not just providing a set of effective services. The surrounding community has endured the pain and trauma of living in poverty, including violence and death. In 2019 there was a mass shooting in the community. Students and families hid in their homes and under their beds while gang warfare broke out on the streets. The fact that Vimenti was available to reach students and families the day after the incident and provide emotional support sent an important message to the community, according to Yglesias: "Do not worry that we are here for you and it is the truth."

Many of those we interviewed feel it is also critical that schools in Puerto Rico make their community their laboratory—an extension beyond the walls of the classroom and school. That means truly reaching out to the community and understanding what is happening in their lives and their priorities, and offering support rather than passing judgment if they are, for example, absent or asleep at school.

As the project continues to expand and grow enrollment, it will be important to create more avenues to gather input about community priorities.



Progress Toward Key Indicators of Success

Vimenti is a school and project highly oriented around data to inform interventions and to track progress toward key indicators. Two full-time data analysts have been added to the team in recent years to manage and track around 200 social, economic, and academic indicators. Data manager Chico says the data team has improved how quickly the data are shared and used to ensure decisions throughout the project: “We have learned to make decisions based on data, with the well-being of the family in mind.”

The most critical short-term indicators they track are around family stability: job losses, health problems, and family and other dynamics that can send a family into a vulnerable position.

Executive Director Bárbara Rivera Batista shared, “We aim to create an evidence-based model to address the issue of poverty and economic mobility

of family using a two-generation approach. Creating opportunities and supporting students and families together depends on the agility of our project to connect services and areas in response to our family stability. Communication between areas, communication with families, sharing results and progress is very important and we continue to work to assure the real support and connections that our families deserved.”

As CEO Eduardo Carrera explained, “Family stability for us is not a ten-year process. This is a week-to-week, month-to-month activity... So opening communication with the family is key: where you at this month. If something changed, how can we support that change? Stability is a driver measure, not a long term endeavor.”

The Vimenti philosophy is that more stable families will help ensure students can succeed academically

and financially down the line, and eventually contribute back to the family. The school’s data so far bear out the first assumption: Vimenti students who do better academically are also more likely to have more stable family assessments.

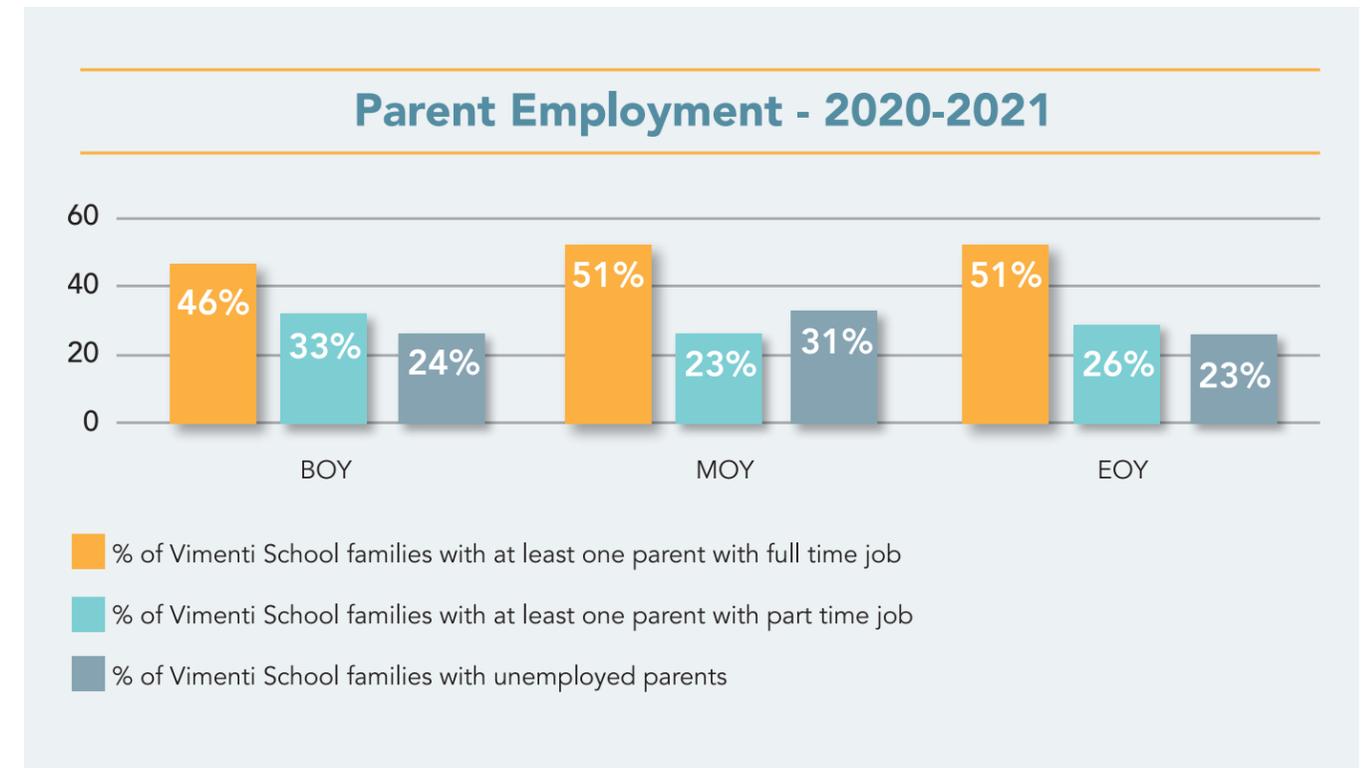
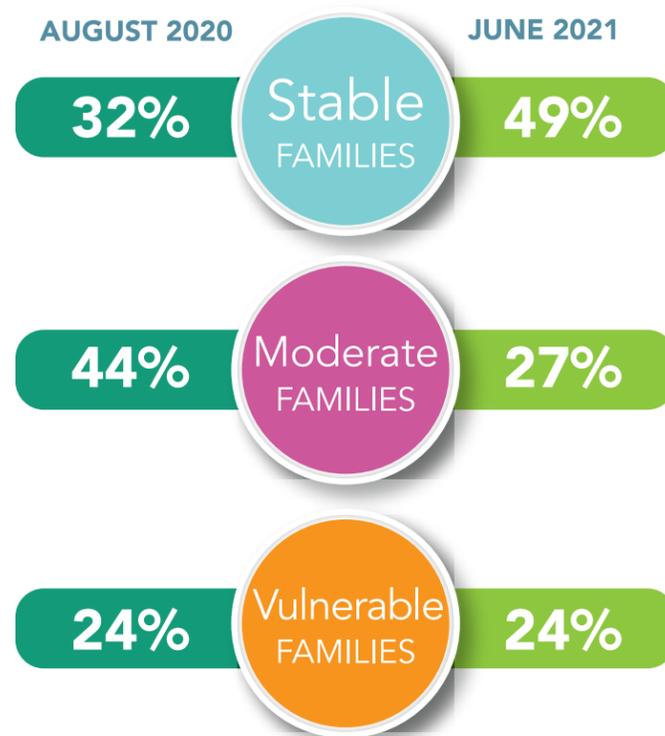
In the last two years, the school’s efforts to help families gain stable employment has appeared to pay off: the percentage of at least one member of the family being unemployed was decreasing annually. However, the pandemic was a major setback for this goal. In a full 31 percent of Vimenti families, at least one parent lost their job because they were laid off or because they had no one to care for their child.

One interviewee spoke about how frustrating it was for the staff to see this loss of momentum and

what challenges and opportunities they see to help families quickly recover from the economic impact of the pandemic:

So while we had made progress, we just lost most of it because of this situation. So now we’re saying OK we need to get our families back to baseline. You have a situation where families have been on federal support and we don’t know if they will want to go back to work. So we have to go back and talk to them again about the benefits of full-time employment even with families where we thought we’d made progress toward economic stability.

Intervention Levels 2020-2021



As another short-term indicator, Vimenti tracks parent perception of the supports they provide via a school climate survey. The results have been increasingly positive, with parents in the 2020–21 school year reporting a very positive perception on ten out of eleven indicators. The survey showed particularly high marks (5/5) for the virtual learning environment, respect for diversity, and school connectedness.

Parent engagement and involvement is an important indicator to Vimenti, and the staff are hopeful that the stronger connections and communication between parents and teachers that virtual education demanded can be maintained going forward. To continue to address these issues, Vimenti leaders are developing indicators to track integration across pillars so that information is no longer siloed. Leaders are asking: How do we measure integration? How do we track progress for the whole child or the whole family, versus components or results?

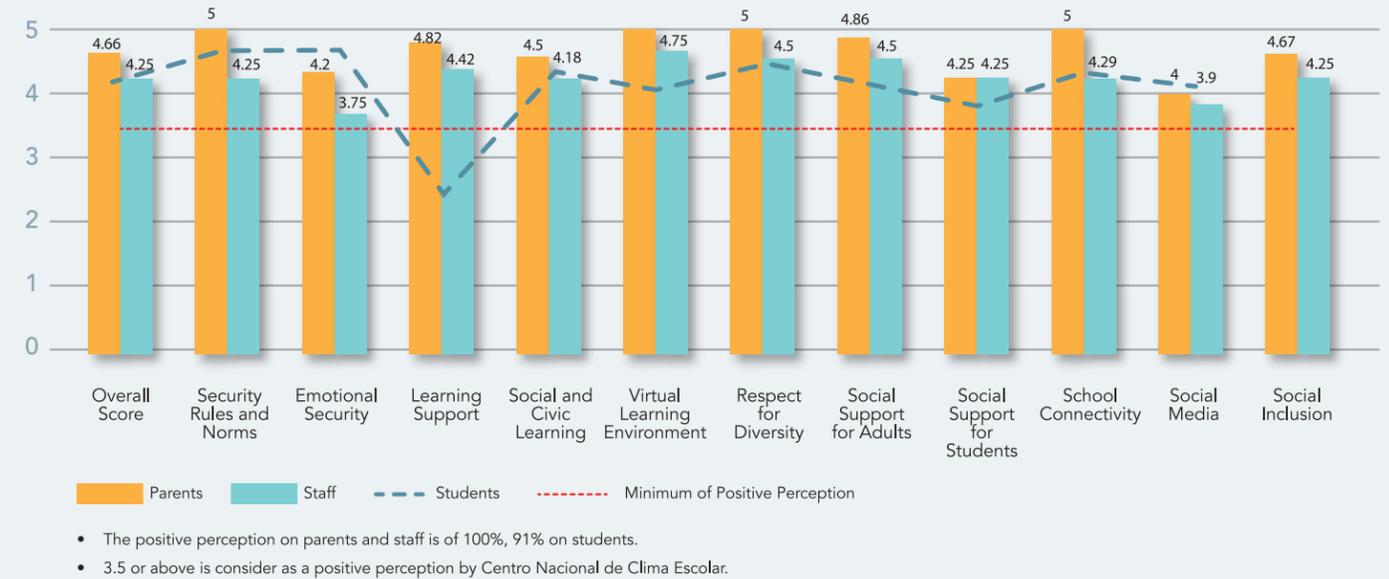
The ultimate indicators for Vimenti, however, are student attendance and participation, academic

growth, and long-term life outcomes. There is no doubt that the pandemic and the move to remote learning caused setbacks with attendance and learning, but the Vimenti team is proud that they were able to respond quickly to reengage students and families and limit the extent of learning loss by moving online quickly and zeroing in on critical skills. The 2020–21 end-of-year data show that Vimenti students have largely held steady in their proficiency rates³ across Spanish, English, and math, with slower than expected growth in some subjects and in some grade levels, but higher than expected growth rates in other cases.

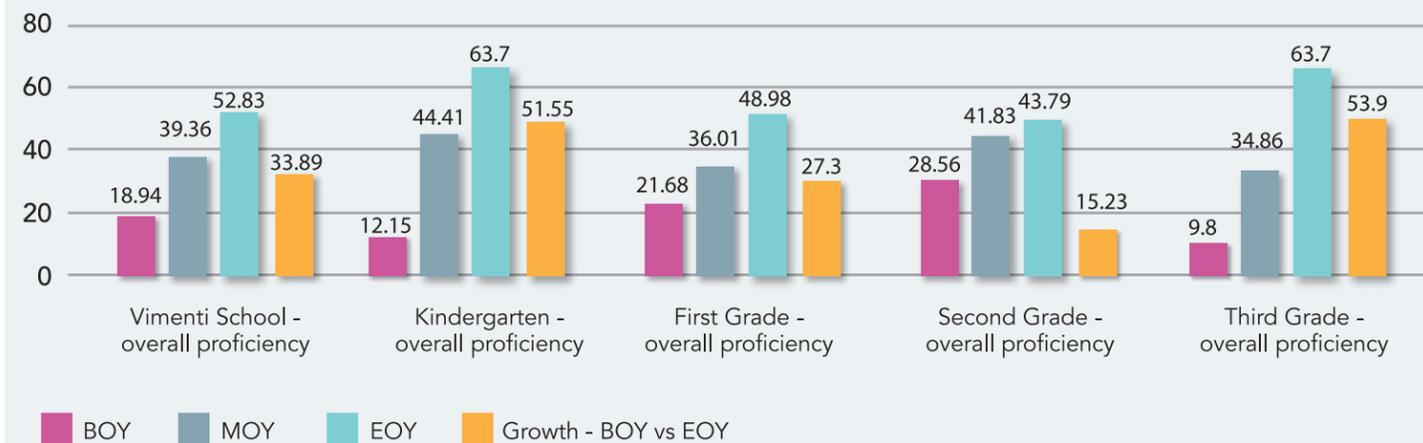
Teachers seem happy that, given all the disruptions, student learning did not suffer more than it did, especially for the youngest learners. But they clearly hope to accelerate progress as quickly as possible. All staff noted that higher test scores are highly correlated with attendance and family stability. While the school intends to focus on reducing chronic absenteeism and family economic instability, it must also stay focused on helping students achieve at high levels, whatever their life circumstances.



School Climate Evaluation



Academic Performance



³ Vimenti School Grade Assessments, IDEL, mCLASS Math and Houghton Mifflin Harcourt "Arriba la lectural!" Assessments.

New Vision for Wraparound Services

As Vimenti continues to grow its enrollment, the project had planned to expand into another building. The original plan was to buy and renovate a closed school but the cost rose the tune of \$10 million when the government significantly changed safety codes. It became more cost effective to tear down the school and rebuild on five and a half acres of land.

With the expansion, the project is taking the opportunity to think bigger about how they can address intergenerational poverty by proposing to build on the grounds what they call a workforce hub—a place where multiple generations can come together and receive support for workforce development. The school, which will eventually serve grades K–12 and 500 students, will be a component. But the hub will also serve parents and adults in the community with a full-scale

family health clinic, a workforce training center, and an incubator for businesses, all within walking distance within the community. About 4,000 individuals will be served in the workforce development programs and about 100 businesses via the incubator. Vimenti has raised \$3 million of the total \$25 million for the project, as of Summer 2021.

The Vimenti leadership team has ambitious goals to develop a widespread vision about what lifelong learning should look like, how to remove barriers—especially health barriers—to employment, and how comprehensively to invest in communities.

The eventual goal is for Vimenti to develop the first workforce hub and collect evidence to expand this type of opportunity across Puerto Rico in the “deserts of opportunity” they see in different communities.

The workforce hub is a natural extension of Vimenti’s current model: combining the educational component, the economic component, and the social component. But as CEO Carrera explained, the more they implemented the model, the more they believed they had to achieve certain levels of scale in order to be effective:

“When we thought about how to align those aspirations of the families to what the quality of environment and quality of services look like . . . that all came crashing down on a vision to have a larger building, to be able to serve more people, and to be able to see the ripple effects to the community. . . . This is a change project, more than anything. We are supporting these families very diligently, but for Puerto Rico this has to become a change of paradigm.”



Next Year: Challenges Ahead, Many Unknowns

“Adapting and addressing challenges has been our reality since our start.”

– Executive Director Bárbara Rivera Batista

At the start of the 2021–22 school year, the Vimenti school is starting its fourth year of operation. A full year and a half of the school’s operation was during a pandemic. This particular crisis came on the heels of Hurricane Maria when the average student missed between 90 and 180 days of school, a major earthquake in January of 2020, which closed 50 percent of all public schools because they had not been properly certified after Maria, and a violent mass shooting in the community. In all, one interviewee put it, “you have an island of kids primarily in poverty that truly have not been in a classroom situation for two and a half years.” The school and its community have the spirit of resiliency, but they are tired.

The school persevered and adapted admirably, but students have lost precious learning and social development time. The Delta variant is on the rise and vaccinations for their students will not be available until at least late 2021. The government could easily close down schools again, forcing a move back to hybrid or fully remote learning.

Amid so many unknowns, school leaders are trying to sort through myriad factors: Will students be fully in-person or hybrid? What are students’ academic and social needs and how should they be prioritized? To inform these decisions, school leaders planned to use the summer analyzing

data, looking for trends, and meeting with a family advisory group to help set priorities. Vimenti educators know they cannot have a one-size-fits-all solution. As one interviewee said, “Some of the things we are talking about now are, ‘These kids are coming and they are all coming with their own situations and we better start figuring it out how we are going to respond individually to their needs.’”

They are confident, however, that they have the systems in place to address these individual needs. Greninger, the educational consultant, noted, “This isn’t new for these teachers because they have to fill gaps all the time.”

School leaders are clearly focused on addressing gaps in academic content and skills, but they do not want to try to “check a box” or “shovel everything the kids lost in one summer.” They hope instead to find developmentally appropriate ways to close gaps, including addressing students’ physical and emotional needs from social isolation, extended screen time, and other challenges. Vimenti will, as usual, rely on partnerships to bring professional expertise to these challenges, with an expectation that such needs will take years to fully address.

While student and family support needs must come first, CEO Carrera says the school is also

working hard to understand how to support faculty who have put in tremendous effort, often while juggling family obligations of their own:

They’re tired. We cannot minimize the cumulative effect on the emotional strength of the educators. We will ask our people to dig deep in their commitment and love for these kids. But I just don’t know if they have taken too much. We have to figure out how to fill their emotional bag, their skills bag for what’s next.

Despite the having challenges behind them from the start-up year and the challenges ahead, the Vimenti team is positive about their growth and future. As one teacher put it, “Seeing it from how it started until now, for me it has been Everest, we have not arrived, but it has been ‘up.’” Elizabeth Greinger, the team’s educational advisor, was even more encouraging, noting that despite many challenges, the school is on the right path: “It’s awesome to see their growth. They are an amazing system to be a part of. They have the right team. Yes there have been growing pains but they have to stay the course. There are always things to shift and adjust but you have to do it thoughtfully and strategically.”



The future is resiliency

“ Our families and students have been addressing trauma for decades, not only on the pandemic but also with hurricanes, violence, earthquakes, and the simple aspect of living in vulnerable conditions.

– Executive Director Bárbara Rivera Batista

While Vimenti leaders know they must focus on meeting pandemic-specific needs, they are also thinking deeply about the broader realities and traumas their families—and Puerto Ricans overall—have faced for the last several years. After Hurricane Maria, the average Puerto Rican child lost 78 days of school. After that came a massive earthquake that closed most schools for three months and some for many months more. And now the pandemic closed schools for eighteen months and possibly longer. For some children, learning and social development have been fundamentally disrupted or completely absent for three years already.

Vimenti knows they must find ways to address the immediate impact of the last eighteen months, but they feel they must also find new ways for Vimenti, and all Puerto Ricans, to address the underlying vulnerabilities of low-income families: the few support services that are available to them to help them weather adversity in general and the cumulative effects of the past several years—along with the long-term impacts of living in poverty.

CEO Carrera and his team are thinking a lot about the history of some of their families: they have had equally traumatic experiences that the pandemic



and hurricanes have wrought for so many. Carrera explained how that realization is influencing their plans for the future:

And for us, we have to understand that it is about the struggle. It is about how we anticipate what is going to be . . . the next hurdles that our families will have to go through? And for me that was an important reflection. I don't think we were anticipating enough. It might not be another pandemic, but there are gonna be things that will derail our kids academically. There will be things that derail the opportunities for our parents to do a good job. And we have to get better. We have to get better . . . on the commitment that adversity will come our way, adversity will come in the way of our families, and we have to figure out . . . what are the necessary things to support families through adversity?

For Executive Director Rivera Batista, the pandemic made visible the emotional vulnerability of our families that has existed for years: “We heard mothers talking around the difficulty during this period and how they have been handling the complexity of losing their jobs, being teachers at home, leading with the uncertainty of the COVID . . . but at the same time we know that the impact goes beyond what we can support immediately. The trauma and impact in the long term on education for our kids, the impact on opportunities of jobs for youth and adults is really a complex aspect that needs more than the immediate response, requires vision and continuation of the work of creating better ways to think and reflect on education, social, and economic mobility as a country.”

Vimenti leaders, like chief development officer Charna Boquette, want people to understand both the dire need in their community and the unique approach they are taking to address that need:

People don't understand. You take the worst-performing state in the U.S., and we're twice as bad, if not triple. For us, this is not just about kid in the classroom. These kids are with us from 7:30 [in the morning] to 6 at night. There is a social pillar and economic supports for the full family. It's about a child that wants to go to school so they have a chance to advance themselves out of poverty. . . . It's that the family has a chance for economic security and learn that they are worthy and can be a valued part of the workforce. Our challenge and our opportunity is to help people inside and outside of Puerto Rico understand that this is more than just a little school.

Indeed, Proyecto Vimenti is much more than a little charter school. The first three years of operation have brought many trials and many lessons learned that other schools on the island, as well as on the mainland, can and should learn from. The pandemic exacerbated and exposed deep structural inequalities and rigidities that Vimenti students and their community experience every day. It also demonstrated the need to reimagine how all schools can be responsive to complex community needs, better leverage community institutional capacities, and overcome deeply entrenched intergenerational barriers to academic and economic opportunity. Proyecto Vimenti is paving the way.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Robin Lake is director of the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) a non-partisan research and policy analysis organization developing transformative, evidence-based solutions for K-12 public education. Her research focuses on U.S. public school system reforms, including public school choice and charter schools; innovation and scale; portfolio management; and effective state and local public oversight practices.

Lake has authored numerous studies and provided expert testimony and technical assistance on charter schools, district-charter collaborations, and urban school reform. She is the editor of *Unique Schools Serving Unique Students: Charter Schools and Children with Special Needs* and editor of *Hopes, Fears, & Reality: A Balanced Look at American Charter Schools*. She co-authored, with Paul Hill, *Charter Schools and Accountability in Public Education*. She has provided invited testimonies to the U.S. House of Representatives Education and Labor Committee as well as various state legislatures.

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Sponsored by Walton Family Foundation

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