

Student Supports at Proyecto Vimenti

By Robin Lake and Silene Vargas Díaz

vimenti
[espacio
para el
desarrollo]

by Boys & Girls Clubs of Puerto Rico



ABSTRACT:

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. The Boys & Girls Clubs of Puerto Rico (BGCPR) has been serving young people inside the Ramos Antonini Public Housing project for 50 years—operating an afterschool program focusing on education, health, life skills, leadership development, and arts. They serve 350 children and youth annually.

After decades of work with local youth, BGCPR 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 that would tackle education and poverty and provide opportunity for young 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 Alliance (charter) School. This is one of three papers documenting lessons about finance and operations, professional development, and student support from the first year and a half of Proyecto Vimenti’s start-up phase. The goal is to inform the next phase of work and to help other Puerto Ricans consider the implications for other Alliance- and Department of Education-run public schools. The authors conducted structured interviews with more than 20 members of the Vimenti community, including parents, teachers, administrators, board members, consultants, funders, and officials from the Puerto Rico Department of Education.

“We believe child poverty is not a disease. It is a condition in which a parent cannot earn enough to raise their child properly. . . The family is the essential unit. Nothing happens in isolation. Each of the [Proyecto Vimenti] components is meant to address an important piece. Each complements the other. Every action has a reaction. So the social component is the glue. It is the most significant part.

– Eduardo Carrera, CEO, Boys & Girls Clubs of Puerto Rico



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Proyecto Vimenti’s target population is children living in the Ernesto Ramos Antonini public housing complex in the community of Villa Prades, which surrounds the Vimenti school site. Ramos is considered one of the most dangerous housing complexes and has one of the highest poverty rates. It is the oldest public residential neighborhood in Puerto Rico—four generations of families live inside Ramos.

- Ninety-eight percent of the children in the community live below the poverty level.
- Sixty-seven percent of the families have a household annual income below \$5,000.
- Forty-two percent struggle with unemployment, compared to 6.3 percent in San Juan, 8.8 percent in Puerto Rico, and 3.6 percent in the United States.

Nearly five years ago, when the Boys & Girls Clubs of Puerto Rico (BGCPR) saw the data from the Youth Development Institute (a sister organization of BGCPR that collects statistics on child poverty in Puerto Rico), they asked themselves: After providing services to these communities for 50 years, what could we transform or innovate to really change the conditions? BGCPR had a history of successes guiding participants to graduate from high school, many of whom are now in college, but they still live in poverty.



BGCPR researched plausible models that address the generational cycle of poverty and how to break out of it. When they found no local models, they decided to create their own.

“We take an inventory of the family’s talents and gaps and work with them to address them,”

BGCPR CEO Eduardo Carrera said.

This paper focuses on a set of questions associated with the population of students Vimenti serves:

- What assets and challenges does this unique student population and their families bring?
- What are the unique goals and strategies—for example, attacking intergenerational poverty?
- How is the school tracking and reporting academic and nonacademic outcomes?
- How are data and experience informing shifts in the school’s strategy?
- What other early indicators might be useful to track?
- What challenges might lie ahead in measuring student achievement and social-emotional growth?

A Wide Range of Assets and Challenges

Emanuela (Emi) Aquafredda from the Children’s Health Fund”, an organization supporting health and wellness at Vimenti, explained the depth of complex needs they see at the school: “People are more aware of the challenges in Puerto Rico because of Hurricane Maria, but they have always been there. The Hurricane just compounded them.”

Bárbara Rivera, Vimenti’s director, explained that the families they serve have basic needs: having access to food, social-emotional needs such as anxiety and stress, and problems with communication and interaction. Rivera commonly sees these needs in students with violence in the home. On the other hand, the school also has many families with a desire to overcome their circumstances. Carrera said the BGCPR founding team realized early through interviews with families that “the desire for a good education was the same in these families as in my family. They have the same aspirations as we do. They really want the best opportunities. Everyone is aligned around that. It is very important.”

Each family has different contexts and “traps,” as Rivera called them. For example: A teenager who became pregnant, didn’t finish high school, and perhaps didn’t have all the preparation to be a mother has a problem because she has no job and no prospects for mobility, including no car. Those traps do not let them progress, and part of what Vimenti does, Rivera says, is look at what those situations are and help move them out:

“ So, in the first year we saw situations as a result of the conditions in which [families] live, but there was also much appetite, wanting a quality education for their children, wanting to participate in the employability program, getting a job. The myth that people who live in [low-income] communities do not want to get ahead or are living in a welfare way, I really didn’t feel it in this group. All the way around, it was: ‘I had not had a chance now I have it, I will grab it and I will walk with it.’ So far I have not seen anyone who does not really want to be linked in any way, the appetite is there.”

What Vimenti experienced when it opened its doors in August 2018 matched their research, but still surprised them. The typical profile of a Vimenti family: single mothers (46 percent), families in poverty (87 percent), unemployed (42 percent),

and limited education (39 percent high school graduates, 11 percent not completed high school). Children served at the school experience ongoing trauma, including violence, food insecurity, illness, deprivation, and natural disaster (hurricane). Nearly a third qualified for special education. Basic health screenings at the school revealed that 50 percent of students have vision problems, 15 percent have hearing problems, 27 percent have asthma, and 43 percent have oral health problems.

Unique Goals and Strategies

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.”² 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.

What makes Vimenti different, Rivera believes, is that,

“ Our school does not enroll a child, our school enrolls the family. We understand that the child does not live in poverty because he is poor, he lives in poverty because his family lives in poverty. If I really want to change the conditions and break that cycle, we may break it with that child as an adult, but we can start right now, by approaching the family. We provide an education of excellence that we understand every child deserves, making sure to meet their needs with a curriculum based on differentiated education that corresponds to the needs of the child and at the same time working with the family as an important component in the child’s educational development.”

Vimenti is a one-stop shop—families receive all the needed services in one place. One of the project’s case managers explained that, “Unlike the other public schools, this is a space where whoever is enrolled and their family will find everything, from

a social intervention by the case management area to a quality education and resources that [Vimenti] has made accessible to them. . . . There is no cost and they are receiving an education as if it were an education from a private school but in a public school that they don’t have to pay absolutely anything.”

In the multigenerational **education pillar**, children receive a high-quality education. Vimenti hopes to create the same educational opportunities for their students as 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. If they have not finished their studies, Vimenti helps them complete high school or continue post-secondary studies.

Once the family is admitted to the school, Vimenti begins an extensive interview process, collecting sociodemographic data, family composition, and identifying family patterns to assess. One of Vimenti’s case managers explained why it is important for the school to collect this information:

“ [They] families are part of a system that often moves them to welfare, and if we want to break the generational cycle of poverty we have to get them out of that cycle. It is a process of breaking paradigms and building paradigms so they feel capable of doing things on their own. Once they can do something that may be the simplest thing, they feel empowered and then a world of

opportunities and possibilities opens up for them, because they feel capable of doing things that for a long time, be it the system, or the family, or the neighbors, or anyone else told them they couldn’t.

In the **socio-emotional pillar**, case managers work on plans with the family and with the students, then work socio-emotional 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, and asthma. In the first year, the school found that almost 50 percent of students needed glasses.

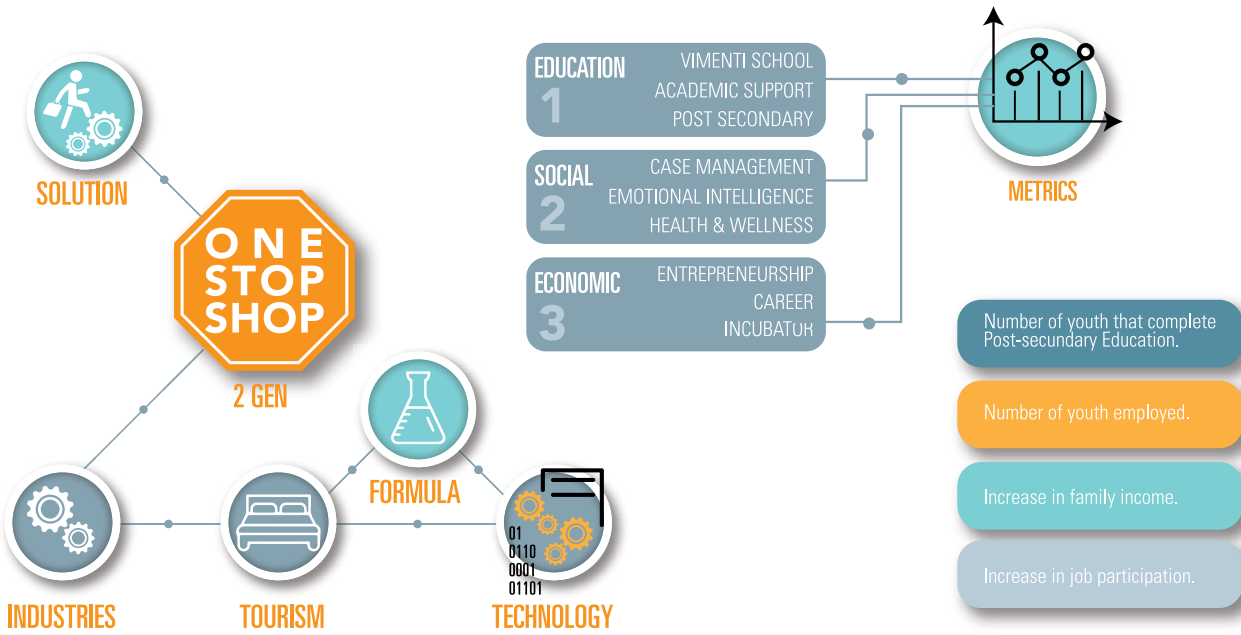
One mother explained how the services function for both students and families:

“ The children have a nurse who, if something happens to the child, a fever or a fall, they have the nurse, they have a pediatrician, a pediatrician who comes to evaluate them. If we, as mothers, have any concerns, we communicate it, they also have a psychologist, I have needed it and I have benefited from the psychologist, it is good.

Having the services delivered at school is a relief to families—many of whom struggle to find transportation—and helps sustain attendance, as one mother explained:

“ Before, my baby had constant weekly appointments I had to get him out of here and take him [to therapy sessions] ...it was too much. Here, thank God, they are giving therapies and he does not miss classes.”

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT



1 “Our Mission,” Children’s Health Fund website, accessed January 24, 2020, <https://www.childrenshealthfund.org/our-mission/>.
2 Joan Lombardi et al., Gateways to Two Generations: The Potential for Early Childhood Programs and Partnerships to Support Children and Parents Together (Washington, D.C.: Aspen Institute, 2014), https://ascend.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Gateways_paper_May2014.pdf.

Children’s Health Fund

Karen Redlener, Executive Vice President and Co-Founder of the New York City-based Children’s Health Fund, got connected to BGCPR CEO Eduardo Carrera through her husband, who was coordinating humanitarian relief to Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria. Her organization’s Healthy and Ready to Learn initiative was working to connect elementary schools with health resources. The idea was to address medical conditions—such as vision, asthma, mental health, dental, hearing and hunger—that interfered with learning, and to address trauma and attendance in high-poverty schools.

Redlener’s husband mentioned the initiative to Carrera, and the lightbulb went off that health and wellness should be incorporated into the Vimenti model.

The design team built health and wellness screenings into the Vimenti design, implementing them into the school’s first year. The Children’s Health Fund began to help address mental health in February 2019, focusing on trauma-informed instructional practices and strategies to increase attendance.

Redlener explained that Vimenti is similar to New York City’s community school model, where afterschool or summer resources are available to students, but she said Proyecto Vimenti is like a “community school on steroids” because they include economic training for families.

“All of us working in the field of poverty,” Redlener says, “we can’t move the needle without cross-sector collaboration.”

In the **economic pillar**, Vimenti provides tools for economic development for adults and young children. Participants develop awareness and appreciation for work and create aspirations for their lives beyond a career. “We want to create in them a sense of the future,” Rivera explained, “with a curriculum from the age of six to adult programs where they are trained to have a career, get a job, and maintain it.”

Students and adults alike are taught computer management skills and learn English. The project’s Health and Wellness coordinator, Melany López, noted that this is an intentional strategy: “We are educating our children but we are also educating our parents in that area, so they can reinforce what the children are learning in school.”

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. One mother we interviewed explained why she believes Vimenti offers a unique service beyond just schooling:

“It’s a growth opportunity for parents too, and not everyone has that. Not only do they attend to children, they also give courses, training for adults so that one as a parent can provide the help that our children need.”

Another mother gave a poignant example of how the interacting pillars have made a difference for her family:

“I was in one of the employability workshops and that was a great experience because at first when I started working, my daughter had certain behavior problems because I did not have time with her, and because [Vimenti] did their best and worked with a psychologist and all that, and now she has an excellent academic performance, I feel extremely proud of her evolution.”

Parents are aware that the services offered are meant to help their child in the long run. Said one parent:

“I am working thanks to [Vimenti]. . . . They give you the opportunity to take computer classes, conversational English, and not so much for us but also for the kids.”

More than a year in, families have developed a foundational level of trust and a relationship with the Vimenti staff—largely because they are known and have services designed specifically for their needs. Across all pillars, integration and individualization are key to the model. As Wilfredo Damiani, director of the Social Pillar explained,

“Personalized, individualized service, I think that stands out, each family has a plan, direction, follow-up, I think that’s one of the most important features.”

The hope is that the summative experience of all three pillars will lead to global citizens who can compete with children who have the best educational opportunities in Puerto Rico, and who will have the same level of skills and opportunities in the future.

A case manager at Vimenti explained what she thinks makes the model work:

“It is not a superficial intervention, it is a deep intervention that generates a deep relationship with the family, I think that has been key. They have given us the opportunity to become part of their family, we are a source of support for many of them, they call us when there are events of violence in the community, they call us and tell what is happening, requesting help, when they have a crisis the first person they turn to is a team person, so we are already positioned in their life as a source of real support and it’s still a long road but what we are doing we are doing well so far.”



Measuring, Tracking, Reporting, and Adapting to Student Outcomes

After three years of operation, BGCPR and Vimenti hope to have enough data to determine if their model really works. They will look at whether their students are as competitive as their peers and how the families are doing. They know the project will take longer than three years for its full effect to be felt; it is a long-term strategy. But they want their outcomes to be evidence-based, and to keep repeating the model until they can show that this recipe is the one that can truly address the conditions of poverty.

Vimenti creates action plans for each family at the beginning of the year with annual goals and assessments, including housing, transportation, education, and employment. “The social area is the force that moves everything else,” Rivera explained. “From there everything else—education, employment, and all other services that the family needs—is born.”

The long-term outcomes are tracked as evidence of success. In the first year, for example, almost 50 percent of the parents who participated in the employability program were parents of children enrolled at the school. Since its opening Vimenti has graduated 91 adults from the employability program; 77 percent are already in the workforce.

Vimenti evaluates and categorizes all adults in the families they serve, determining if they are vulnerable, moderate, or stable. The goal is to lead them to stability and improve their economic and social conditions. The school started with a very high percentage of vulnerable families, about 36 percent; at the end of the school year only 9 percent were still in that category, the rest having moved into moderate or stable conditions (see graphic

below). Not all of these changes can be attributed to Vimenti’s interventions, but they are notable and deserve celebration and further study.

A Vimenti case manager told us about one family that arrived “totally vulnerable and bottoming out in many aspects of their lives” but had stabilized significantly since starting at the school. The mother had started university but had to leave before graduating. Vimenti helped her start building small successes, identifying her strengths, establishing paternity with the father of one of her children, participating in the employability program, and now training for a career in the tourism industry where she has a high likelihood of finding a job.

About 80 percent of families currently participate in the social and economic programs. While Vimenti staff would prefer 100 percent participation, they respect that each family has to develop the trust and respect to open up. The goal is to keep focusing on strengths and motivation in the hope that families will engage when they are ready.

As for the students, Vimenti uses a range of assessments to track academic progress, measure progress, and determine what supports they require. The school works hard to maintain consistency on the assessment process so they can use the results to adjust and differentiate instruction. This is a challenging task because teachers can have 17 students and think that the group is small, but the diversity of need is great. However, the strategy is showing positive early results.

Wilfredo Damiani, Social Area director, spoke about the academic growth the school accomplished in the first year:

“Our kindergarten students started with a 28 percent mastery in the basic subjects and finished with 46 percent in May, and although it is not our goal, because our goal is to have 70 percent mastery—but we are talking about a growth of 18 percentage points, a quite significant growth despite the needs of each of our students. [First grade children] started with a 54 percent mastery of the subjects and ended with 83 percent, so definitely the process that was executed, despite the difficulties, paid off.

Parents receive regular communication about their child’s progress, including four Parent-Teacher Conferences each year, which are meant to build trust with families. Report cards go out to parents in January and May and include a written account on how their child is doing. Rather than grades, the school reports on whether or not the child has mastered the expected skills for the grade level. An annual parent assembly and other activities connect parents to the school and to their child’s achievement.

One mother told us that when her daughter was in kindergarten at another school she “learned almost nothing,” and teachers wouldn’t talk to her unless

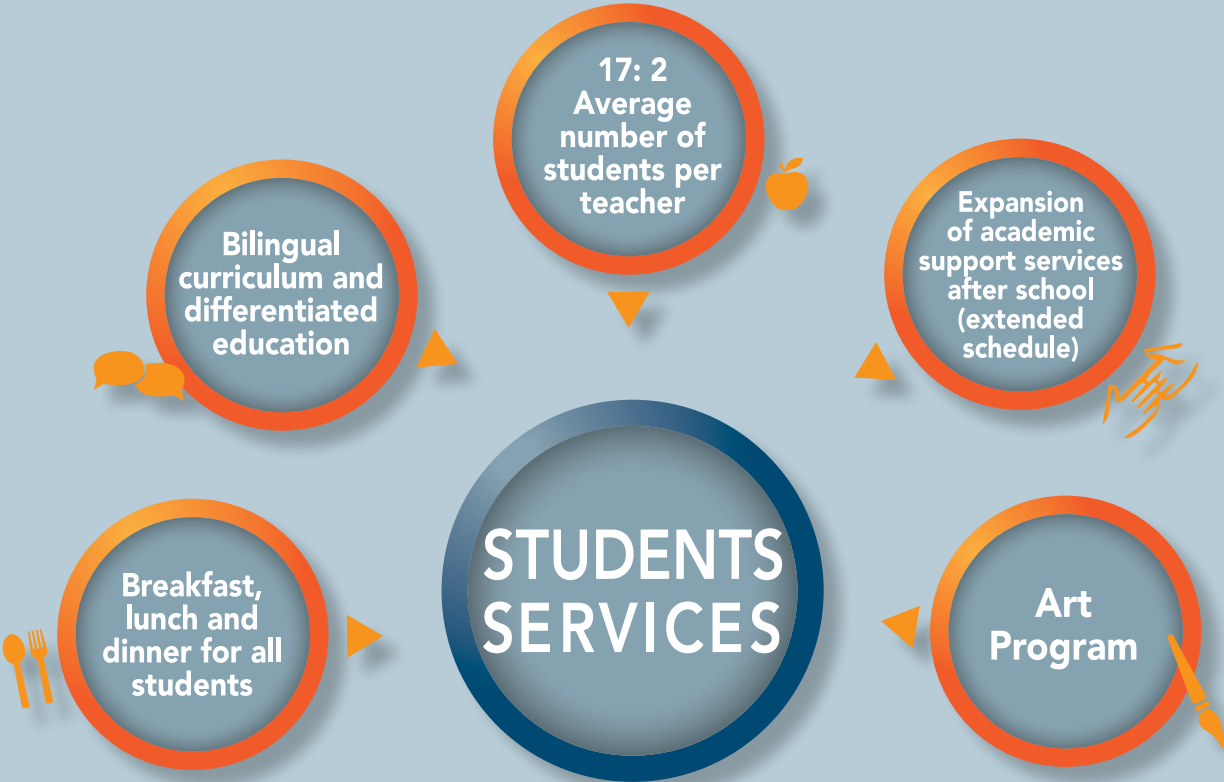
she had an appointment. At Vimenti she says she is welcome to visit and observe anytime and teachers take the time to discuss progress.

“They call us for any reason, however small, they have constant communication and I love it. Also with respect to the grades, in the end all they said [at the other school] was, ‘Look, he has an F.’ But not here. Here they tell you, ‘Let’s deal with this.’ I like the communication.” Another described highly detailed teacher-parent communication: “Any little thing that they see in the student, that they have been able to achieve or every detail, they let you know what happens on each student’s day.

As a publicly funded and overseen Alliance charter school, Vimenti is held accountable for academic results. However, Puerto Rico’s Secretary of Education, Eligio Hernández Pérez, says qualitative data from students and families is also extremely important to him. On one visit to the school, Secretary Hernández Pérez was impressed to speak to a father who said he had enrolled his child at the school because it was close to his home, but did not realize the school would transform his family by helping his wife enroll in university. The Secretary also spoke to children who reported changing their eating habits, getting visits by their teacher at home, and loving school so much they want to attend on weekends and holidays.

LEVELS OF FAMILY INTERVENTION

		August 2018	May 2019
Vulnerable	Families with intrafamilial situations and low level of poverty that prevents physical and emotional security.	36%	9%
Moderate or intermediate state	Stable families intrafamilial but with economic problems or families moderately stable in the economic area but with intrafamilial problems.	41%	65%
Stable	Stable families intrafamilial and with moderate or good economic stability.	23%	26%



Challenges and Opportunities Ahead

Tracking student success: Testing a model like Proyecto Vimenti is a challenge in itself. Finding reliable measures of progress on social-emotional skills, mental health, and other factors is difficult. The Vimenti board and leadership team understand the almost limitless need in their community, but they also know they must be able to implement and test their model in order to continuously improve and to serve as a legitimate proof point for other schools and for public policy.

The board, most immediately, will look eagerly to the second graders’ test results (in the school’s third year of operation), which will be the first comparative look at how their students perform academically. They are hoping students do substantially better than their peers. They also want to see independent readers in second grade, on the assumption that if students are reading independently, they will do well. If they are ready to read in third grade, the school can really push them to begin thinking critically.

Special needs: About a third of Vimenti students are identified as having special needs. Whether or not they actually have a disability, or are suffering from the effects of trauma or malnourishment or other side effects of poverty is not certain, but regardless, they required more intensive supports than the school was prepared to provide. The Department of Education never offered any support or resources. They eventually assigned a Department teacher, and BGCPR brought in their own provider for therapies in school so families wouldn’t have to leave. This year, Vimenti has two teachers (one provided by the Department, one provided by BGCPR) plus behavioral support.

This lack of financial support from the Department of Education cannot continue. There must be a clear formula for a child’s share of special education funds to follow the child to Vimenti, and the school should be able to hire its own special education faculty if they are to be held accountable for results.

Parent integration: Despite the many happy parents we interviewed, Carrera believes the school has more work to do to
“move from the grateful stage to ‘We are all parties.’”

Last year Vimenti conducted a climate survey which showed that parents are very engaged but, Carrera said,
“Now we are working to help them understand how to hold us accountable.”
The school has started a parent counsel and continues to work to find ways to more fully engage families.

Integrating physical and mental health with academic supports: Vimenti’s hypothesis is that in-school services are essential to the academic success of children from low-income families. While further study is needed to assess the causal impact of Vimenti’s comprehensive approach, teachers and administrators—as well as parents—at the school all feel strongly that the ongoing interventions and tight family-school coordination is the correct approach for a school that serves so many students affected by poverty and trauma. Future research should attempt to isolate the impact of these interventions and analyze how they can be better integrated with academic interventions.

Conclusion: Solid Indicators of Progress, But Work Lies Ahead

There is no doubt that the community served by Proyecto Vimenti is profoundly affected by a complex and deeply embedded set of barriers and traps. One can see why Vimenti and BGCPR have come to believe that the school alone cannot overcome them. The experiment Vimenti represents is just taking hold and evidence is inconclusive. Early indicators on employment and economic stability are tantalizing, however, and reports from parents are compelling. But to serve as the proof point they hope to be, Vimenti must continue to systematically track progress and look for more rigorous ways to track early indicators, adjust course when needed, and then present compelling evidence on outcomes. Although the project is collecting all kinds of data, there is no external evaluator and no rigorous methodology to isolate the value the project adds. This would be yet another cost to the school, but it may be mission critical. As one mother pled,
“This school must be a model for public schools throughout Puerto Rico.”

STUDENTS’
PROFILE

