

## Acknowledgments

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## Background

**Historical Context:** Under the guise of colonialism, education functions as a key to consciousness and freedom. In the case of Puerto Rico, the island's socio-economic and political development is chained to the United States by its commonwealth status. In 2016, the implementation of the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA) otherwise known as La Junta to locals, to manage the island's \$72 billion debt and promote risk management in the education system with Julia Kehler as the Secretary of Education (Wessel, 2022). Foreign control of the education system in Puerto Rico with *La Junta* and Kehler magnified the monopolization of resources through investment of real estate with the closure of 428 public schools. The creation of the Education Reform Act in 2018 redefined the future of Puerto Rican youth, in conjunction with Act 20/22, allowed for foreigners to benefit from school closure through tax incentives that natives did not have access to (Rubiano Yedidia et al., 2020). Policies like The Education Reform Act show how education functions as a scapegoat to manipulate public resources by privatizing them. Acknowledging the neoliberal policies in Puerto Rico's education system helps us understand the ways in which coloniality is embedded in Puerto Rican culture through the privatization of education and unmarks a veil of submission embedded in Boricuan culture.

## Goals & Objectives of the Work

In the 21st century, there is a growing lack of awareness on the degree of coloniality and the cause of displacement of Boricuas. Through interviews of education stakeholders and GIS mapping, this work aims to assess the progression of privatization as a form of colonial authority in Puerto Rico's education system. My findings aim to reveal how neocolonialism, operating through legislation and educational practices, limits any meaningful efforts to achieve social mobility and dismantle the oppressive systems that have chained Puerto Rico's past, present and future.

1. In what ways has the U.S. and Puerto Rican neocolonial relationship impacted the educational system in Puerto Rico over time?
  - a. How have Puerto Ricans mobilized in response to this colonial history and current education reforms?

## Methods

### G.I.S. Mapping

The collection of data for this project was a tedious and selective process considering the convoluted nature of the Department of Education when it comes to school closures. In figure 1 data from the school closures data from 2018 to 2023 and were sourced by government document through the CPI and Committee of Real Estate Appraisal and Disposition. The base layer is data from Census tract American Community Survey of Geographic Mobility in 2020 on a 5-year estimate. For figure 2 data the data of open schools was obtained by the U.S Department of Education, Directory of Public Alianza Schools and Google Maps. This data is over a Vacancy Rates obtained from the Census tract of the American Community Survey Housing Units 5 year estimate 2017-2021.

### Interviews

To understand the nature of the education system from professionals in the field. I interviewed one private high school English teacher, Chana Torres Dávila, and a Head Start Coordinador in Corozal for students with special needs, Pablo Juan Rubio (who worked from 1992 to 2020). In order to gain a federal background I interviewed Lcd. Joel Vázquez Rosario, legislator de San Juan, and Omar Ayala Gonzalez, Co-Founder of Urbe A Pie, to offer a perspective on the conjunction of communal education efforts and the loss of Boricuan autonomy.

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## Results

**Charter Schools and Education Reform:** Fiscal mismanagement of education feeds a divide between social mobility and land rights. The Education Reform Act aimed to rectify the education crisis through charter schools. Charter schools are publicly funded through legislative contracts but operate independently from state regulations, allowing an autonomous education design which perpetuates neocolonial design (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). School closures were not an unprecedented action in Puerto Rico before the Junta, but formalized colonial models of leadership that favored private domains in the island accelerated the closure rate, with 65% occurring in rural areas (Hinojosa et al., 2019). Act 20/22 beneficiaries bought the title of closed schools— even under multiple LLC's like Brian Tenenbaum who bought three schools titles costing \$1,540,000 with tax benefits (Díaz Ramos, 2020). This created what is known as a "public-private alliance" where the state of affairs are neocolonial by nature of supply and demand. Education is a systemic mechanism used to magnify this alliance whether it be from schools curriculum to manipulate knowledge attainment or land management of schools. These colonial dynamics stem from the island becoming an Associated Free State in the 1950s but now Act 20/22 has catalyzed the modes of investment in the island by having real estate developments more accessible (Lefty, 2021).

**Maps:** Increased in privatization of education with charter schools, the access to public education has caused an exodus in the island. By the year 2026 the Department of Education's "vision of the future" plan supported by the Education Reform Act proposes consolidating an additional 83 schools — displacing around 18,644 students (Díaz Ramos & Encarnación Martínez, 2022). Displacing students affects their social mobility as those predominantly affected are low-income. Students have limited means to access other public schools by not having the resources like transportation. Currently, 18 schools have closed from 2019-2020 per Figure 2 with an additional 16 scheduled to close as shown in Figure 1. Two schools planned to close are specialized schools in music: Escuela Libre de Música Ernesto Ramos Antonini in San Juan and Escuela Central Artes Visuales in San Juan— an area with a high presence of gentrification and a part of Puerto Rico Fiscal Agency and Financial Advisory Authority "opportunity zones". While opportunity zones are more susceptible to gentrification, low income areas and communities are at higher risk of loss because they have less resources to mobilize. For example, in Yabucoa where 25% of families' annual income is around \$10,000 with a 18% vacancy rate per Figure 2, the DOE plans to close four more schools: Escuela Elemental Rosa Costa Valdivieso, Escuela Marta Sánchez Alverio, Escuela José F. Cintrón y Anexo, and Escuela Manuel Ortiz, displacing around 579 students (Díaz Ramos & Encarnación Martínez, 2022). Both Figure 1 and 2 highlight the relationship of colonialism and displacement of the body or land. Though figure 1 shows a higher concentration of the geomobility rates resides in the metro area— a sector largely populated by Act 20/22 beneficiaries.

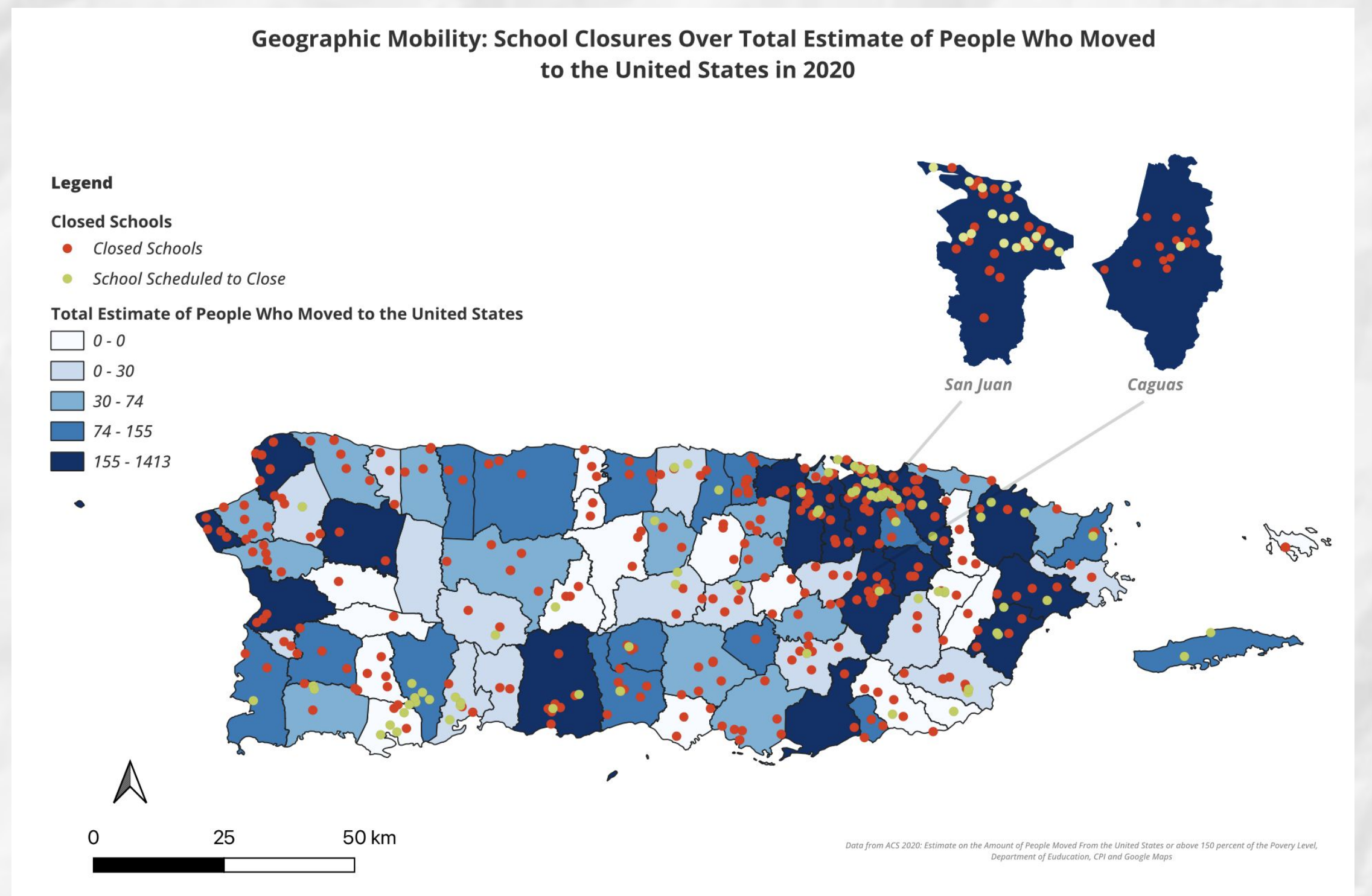


Figure 1. Geographic Mobility: School Closures Over Total Estimate of People Who Moved to the U.S. in 2020

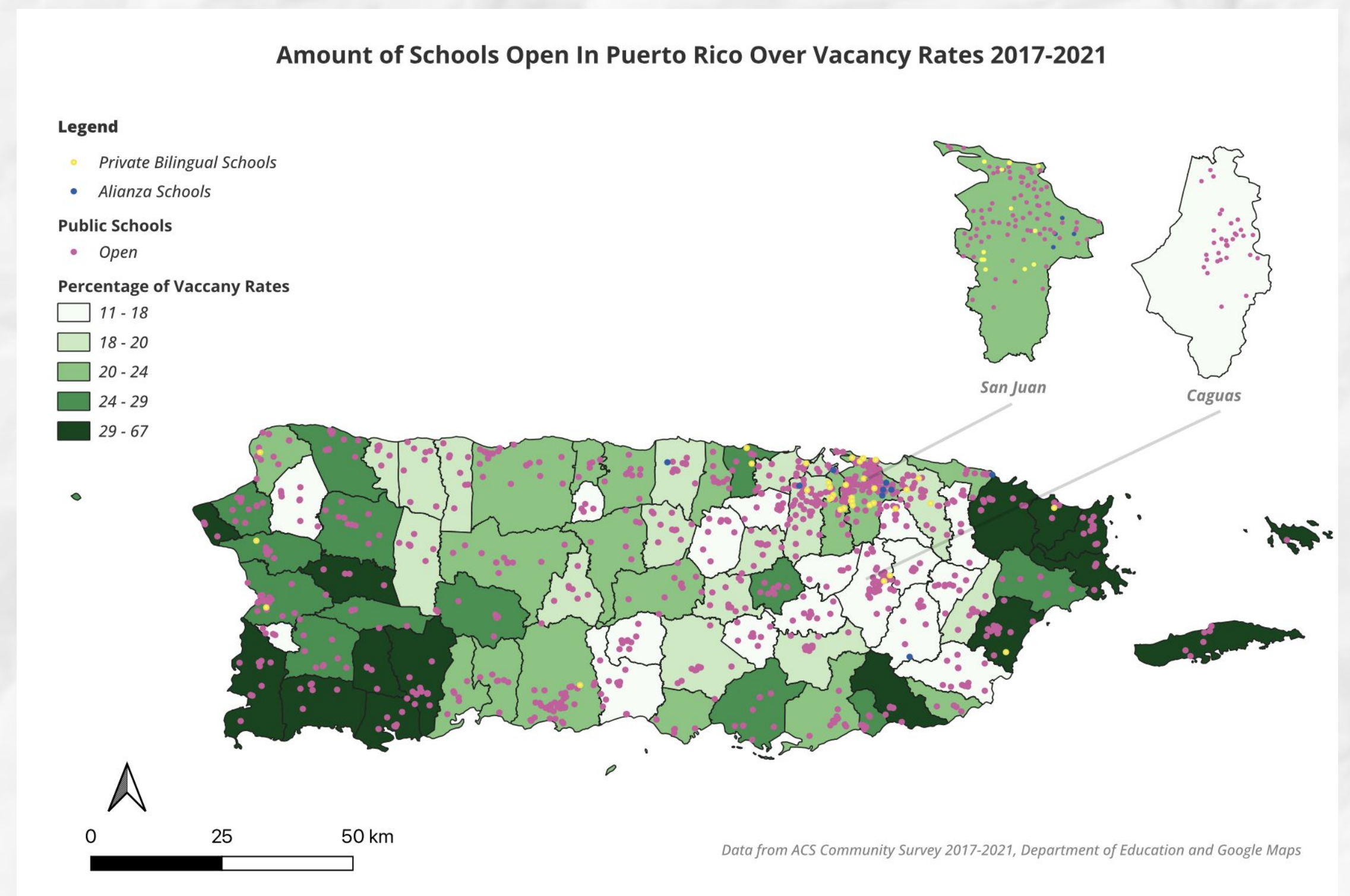


Figure 2. Amount of Schools Open in Puerto Rico Over Vacancy Rates 2017-2021

## Conclusions

Policies like the Education Reform Act, Act 20/22 and others catalyzed a neo colonial relationship as they curated socio-economic structures to promoted inequitable development through political decree. Currently the public education system's infrastructure in the island follows a United States model of knowledge attainment and colonial organization. The colonial foundation of the public education system induces loss as in 2021, 73,233 students moved to study in the United States and 16,681 to attend private schools— affecting 73% of enrollment in the public education sector (Caraballo Cueto, 2021). Fluctuation in public-private alliance in the education sector has cost the future of the island as 12,132 students failed the academic school year in 2022 (Metro, 2022). Prioritizing the privatization of land and Puerto Rico's resources like education curates a future isolated from the needs of Boricuas. If the education system and mobility continue to adhere to an agenda of privatization to further investment, the island becomes a Borinquen without Boricuas.

## Next Steps

1. Collaborate with nonprofits like Urbe A Pie on the island to expand a more inclusive agenda of education in Puerto Rico
  - a. Ex: Gender and Sexual education under a decolonial lens
2. Examine the state of education reform for teachers by aiming to create a support network of teachers in the private and public sectors