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INSIGHT

A bright future for public education

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The future could not be brighter for public education in Hawaii. To understand why, it helps to review a bit of recent history.

Prior to 2011, it was impossible to hold any politician or political body accountable for the quality of public education in Hawaii. Although the elected Board of Education appeared to be in charge, the Legislature and the governor each wielded comparable power.

Three strong-willed political offices were simultaneously trying to control a state Department of Education that provides tens of thousands of jobs and spends more than \$2 billion annually. Each of the three -- the school board, the Legislature and the governor -- had enough power to frustrate the other two, but not enough to control anything.

Since 2010, the governor has had the power that governors have always had, plus the power to appoint all nine members of the state's only school board. The Legislature continues to wield considerable power by controlling the level of appropriated funds, but enough power now resides in the governor to make accountability possible.

Unfortunately, under former Gov. Neil Abercrombie's appointees and the superintendent they oversaw, the DOE became more centralized, more top-down, and more reliant on one-size-fits-all dictates to school-level personnel.

In the attempt to implement federal requirements agreed to as a condition of receiving Race to the Top funds, schools were systematically stripped of their ability to exercise local decision-making by DOE leadership who mandated the instructional and assessment processes. Morale at the school level plummeted, and student performance stagnated.

In his first State of the State address in January, Gov. David Ige promised to appoint school board members "who embrace school empowerment of our principals and teachers as the key to

ensure student success," and added that instead of issuing mandates from the state office, his appointees will focus on "empowering schools and delivering resources to the school level."

Many have asked, "What, exactly, is school empowerment?"

School empowerment recognizes the uniqueness of each school community and that one size rarely fits all, which makes it nearly the opposite of Hawaii's current management mentality.

An empowered-schools system requires a philosophical shift in which DOE employees fall into either of only two categories: those who work directly with students, and those who support the efforts of those who work directly with students.

Teachers in an empowered school determine the means by which to satisfy statewide standards and policies. They have ready access to information about their school's budget and have a voice in all important matters affecting their respective school. They also play a meaningful role in holding their principal and other administrators accountable.

Principals have significantly greater control over financial and staffing decisions in empowered schools, but they must constantly engage the entire school community - teachers, parents, librarians, cafeteria workers, custodians and anyone else who sees the students daily - in meaningful discussions about spending, staffing, and curricular and instructional decisions.

Students in empowered schools have a voice that increases from elementary through high school, and student aspirations beyond high school determine student-centered learning programs in which learner empowerment and learner accountability are aligned and emphasized.

The people who set statewide standards and policies cease to control the means by which school-level personnel achieve desired results, and service providers cannot take for granted their "customers." School-level personnel unhappy with services provided by the DOE have the option of seeking those services elsewhere.

The adults in an empowered-schools system of public education model shared values such as collaboration, transparency, integrity, equity and life-long learning. They also embrace clarity of responsibility and mechanisms of accountability -- especially those that focus on student achievement. Accountability without empowerment is unfair and ineffective, and empowerment without accountability would lead to chaos.

By empowering others, the governor is modeling leadership at its very best.



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