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Power to the schools

A new think tank wants principals and teachers to be in charge, with the state Department of Education serving a supporting role

By Christine Donnelly

The call for school empowerment has intensified over the past year, as dictates by the federal government and the state Department of Education galvanized some principals and teachers to warn that students will suffer as local communities lose control of their neighborhood schools.

Hawaii's public education system has always been more centralized than most states, thanks to having a single school district that ensures funding equity statewide but also imposes a bureaucracy less overarching in smaller, more personalized districts. For a decade through the turn of the 21st century, though, Hawaii had been taking steps to give principals, teachers and school-based councils, which included parents, more authority over campus operations. In 2004, the state Legislature passed Act 51, the Reinventing Education Act, to catalyze the movement.

Progress stalled, however, especially with the advent of powerful U.S. laws such as No Child Left Behind, which emphasized students' standardized test scores as the arbiter of school achievement, and later through Race to the Top, a competitive grant under which Hawaii's DOE accepted federal mandates in exchange for \$75 million in funding over five years.

The RTT grant expired this year, but its top-down, cookie-cutter mentality remains, lament critics who are trying to reinvigorate the empowerment movement. Their effort includes sharing with educators, school board members, students, parents, the business community and the general public why they believe the philosophy known variously as decentralization, site-based decision making or school-based budgeting remains the route to sustained success.

Leading the charge is the Education Institute of Hawaii, a think tank formed this fall in the wake of a survey that revealed deep dissatisfaction among current public-school principals. The nonprofit is founded on the belief that principals and teachers are trustworthy professionals with the best interests of students at heart. This tenet holds, then, that decisions at any given school about which faculty and staff to hire, curricula to teach, extracurricular programs to offer — in short, how to allocate the budget — are best made by the people who interact with the students every day, not by the central office or by mainland consultants. Under the empowerment model, district or state offices exist to fill the needs of individual schools, but do not dictate their operations.

"It's a real shift from the way we've been doing things in Hawaii, and it's a lot of hard work, but for the districts that do it right, boy, the results can be amazing," said University of Hawaii law professor Randall Roth, who is a founding board member and president of the EIH.

The nonprofit led a fact-finding mission to several North American school systems that are decentralized, in full or in part, traveling over fall break early last month. The 27-member delegation included longtime empowerment advocates, such as Roth and retired Moanalua High School principal Darrel Galera, who is executive director of EIH, having left the DOE and sounded the alarm about its direction through the principals' survey he conducted. It also included current DOE employees, with the blessing of Board of Education Chairman Don Horner and Superintendent Kathryn Matayoshi, including teachers, principals, complex area superintendents and state-office employees; two current BOE members also went along. The delegation's diversity was intentional, as EIH sought to include educators, policymakers and labor leaders unfamiliar with or perhaps even opposed to the concept. The contingent found out how school empowerment works elsewhere and how it might work here.

Now the EIH wants to expand the conversation, inviting educators, administrators and the general public to a free Hawaii School Empowerment Conference Nov. 28-29 (see box) that will feature speakers from the school systems the fact-finders visited in Edmonton, Canada, Los Angeles and Las Vegas, and have members of the Hawaii traveling group share their impressions.

Attendees will hear about how the Edmonton system transformed into one so responsive to the needs of students, parents, teachers and principals that public schools are favored over private ones, for highly gifted students as well as for those with learning difficulties (Edmonton counts students on both ends of the intellectual spectrum as having special needs). They'll hear about how principals are able to hire the teachers that fit best in their schools, with the agreement of teacher unions. Many of these improvements grew out of small pilot projects — seven schools initially, in Edmonton's case — that spread as the advantages for students became obvious.

"It's vital that we get this going at the grassroots. A lot of people don't realize what is being lost," said Catherine Payne, who was principal of Farrington High School for 15 years and now is chairwoman of the State Public Charter School Commission; she also sits on the Education Institute of Hawaii's governing board. Payne said that even before she retired from Farrington in 2010, central-office support for school autonomy was dropping, a decline that has since accelerated.

"We're moving back to a top-down system. People sort of accepted this because of the federal influence, but as it's been happening, many, many people have started to question it," she said. "How is this really a better system? When you look at sustaining quality in any system, you must have people who are actually doing the work feel like they have influence and value."

Principals and teachers today "have tons of responsibility and accountability, but very little authority," Payne said, noting new restrictions on how schools spend per-pupil funding and mandated curricula. "What we have now, frankly, is a system that develops people to become compliance officers" rather than the leaders campuses need.

"The whole approach at state and district offices needs to ask 'How do we support schools?,' not just 'How do we monitor schools?' ... That's the big shift that we need to make ... that's the model of visionary leadership we have to embrace," said Payne, emphasizing that EIH wants to partner with the DOE to advance school empowerment.

Matayoshi and her state-level leadership team have defended the DOE's strategic plan as one that drives reform throughout the school system, with measureable improvements in student achievement to show for it.

She won't be attending the School Empowerment conference herself, but a number of DOE leadership staff will, including some assistant superintendents, complex area superintendents and department directors, said DOE Communications Director Donalyn Dela Cruz.

Union officials plan to be there, too, with some having visited the empowered schools and been heartened by what they learned. Joan Lewis, an English teacher at Kapolei High School and vice president of the Hawaii State Teachers Association, was among five representatives of the 27-member travel group who sat down with the Honolulu Star-Advertiser editorial board recently to recap the experience.

Lewis, who considers the funding equity inherent in Hawaii's statewide school system "essential, now and moving forward," appreciated that employees of empowered districts were trusted as professionals capable of guiding students to meet high expectations. "The entire staff was committed fully" to the school's mission, and higher-ups supported the credo of "your end, my means" — meaning that a state or district office could set standards but not dictate how individual schools met them. Such flexibility frees schools to do right by their unique communities, Lewis said, which on

some campuses might mean investing in laptops or other instructional technology, rather than a standardized curriculum.

The risk of stifling creativity and institutionalizing "sameness," as opposed to equity, is a rising concern nationally in the Common Core era. Such uniformity is easier to achieve here than in most states, given that only Hawaii has a single school district and the central authority that goes with it (in the form of the DOE, and its overseer, the BOE.)

"This is something that parents are thinking about," said Lois Yamauchi, president of the advocacy group Parents for Public Schools. Yamauchi was dismayed that the same curriculum was mandated for the whole state.

"It's not that this particular curriculum is bad. It's a fine curriculum. It's just that I think that it takes away from the school community making decisions about what is right for their kids," said Yamauchi, who looks forward to hearing more from EIH about school empowerment.

"We have a lot of confidence in the schools, in the educators in particular. We welcome any effort that invests more authority in the school itself, the teacher and principals, to act in the best interests of their students," said Yamauchi. "Over and over again, when we ask families who have children in the public schools what they love about their schools, they say it's the teachers and they say it's the principals. We're advocating for those folks at the school level."

A meeting of education minds

All are welcome at the Hawaii School Empowerment Conference sponsored by the Education Institute of Hawaii, although the symposium is especially relevant to principals, vice principals and teachers, as well as policymakers such as state lawmakers and Department of Education state and district administrators. Representatives from school districts in Canada, California and Nevada that the Hawaii delegation visited last month will speak and answer questions, and Hawaii members of the fact-finding delegation also will share their experiences.

When: Nov. 28-29

Time: 8 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. each day

Where: Moanalua High School, 2825 Ala Ilima St.

Cost: Free, including lunch each day

Registration: <http://svy.mk/1zBihnH>