

School Empowerment

By Randall Roth and Darrel Galera¹

A general description:

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 governance structure and 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 how best to satisfy statewide standards and policies. They also have ready access to information about their school’s budget and have a voice in all important matters affecting their respective school. And they 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.

Statewide standards, policies and learning goals continue to play major roles in an empowered-schools system, and non-school staff continues to provide services to the schools. But those who set standards and promulgate policy never control the means by which school-level personnel achieve desired results, and services 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 empowered schools model shared values such as collaboration, transparency, integrity, equity and life-long learning. They also embrace clarity of responsibility for student success and maintain a systemwide commitment to capacity-building for instructional and other forms of leadership.

¹ Roth and Galera co-founded the Education Institute of Hawaii in 2014. Currently Roth serves as Chairman of the Board and Galera as Executive Director. They prepared this for Governor Ige’s 2016 Education Summit.

Empowerment and accountability in an empowered-schools system must always be aligned: accountability without empowerment would be unfair and ineffective, and empowerment without accountability would lead to chaos.

How EIH developed a common understanding of the term:

The Education Institute of Hawaii (EIH) sent a 27-person delegation to observe the governance structures of the school systems in Los Angeles, Las Vegas, and Edmonton in October 2014. The group included members of the BOE, assistant superintendents and other senior administrators in the DOE's central office, complex area superintendents, award-winning school principals, award-winning teachers, parent-advocates, school community council members, an official of the teachers union, and several members of the EIH board. EIH worked closely with Superintendent Matayoshi and BOE chair Horner in selecting individuals who had earned the trust and respect of their peers for being knowledgeable and open-minded.² The delegation met several times before leaving on the trip and gathered each evening during the trip for debriefing sessions, the last of which lasted five hours. These Q&A about the trip had been provided to the delegation and the media prior to the trip:

What is the purpose of the trip? The purpose of the trip is to learn about other public-school systems that have changed or tried to change their organizational structures. The travelers will seek information about how these systems were once structured; how they are structured now; what the restructuring was intended to accomplish; and the current assessment of people at all levels of the system about the restructuring (e.g., what they like and don't like about the current organizational structure, and especially their thoughts on its relationship, if any, to their goal of providing an outstanding educational opportunity to the children).

Why were Los Angeles, Las Vegas, and Edmonton chosen for the trip? These systems were chosen because each has attempted to revamp its governance structure in innovative ways and has been widely recognized for the scope of their reform efforts. Not all the changes they made worked as intended; some did not even survive the pilot stage. None of these very different systems was held out as a model for Hawaii to emulate. The Education Institute believes there is as much to be learned from failures as from successes.

What was the role and responsibility of the travelers? Members of the delegation have been asked to learn as much as possible about how governance works in these systems and give special attention to the aspects that might be worth considering for Hawaii. They are also asked to share their thoughts and opinions – whatever those thoughts might be – with as many of their peers and others as is possible after returning home. Members of the delegation will be participating in follow-up activities, including the School Empowerment Conference at Moanalua High School on November 28-29, 2014.

² A list of delegation members and brief bios appears at end of this handout.

What about ideas that seemingly could never be implemented in Hawaii? Members of the delegation are asked not to discard an otherwise good idea simply because it might be extremely difficult to implement in Hawaii for political reasons. The Education Institute invites them to ask themselves this question when evaluating the innovations in Los Angeles, Las Vegas, and Edmonton: “Assuming that this could be implemented in Hawaii, would it be a good thing to do?”

What is school empowerment? The delegation has already spent a great deal of time trying to develop a common understanding of school empowerment—but has not yet done so. Here is what the Education Institute of Hawaii has provided to them as a suggested starting point prior to the trip:

Accountability is critically important, particularly in a complex organization like Hawaii’s DOE. But in any school system, it would be unfair and counterproductive organizationally to try to hold school-level personnel accountable for student outcomes if they lack sufficient control over decisionmaking directly affecting their ability to achieve desired outcomes for their students. Accordingly, the Education Institute favors involving people at each level in decisions that are designed to achieve the results for which those people will be held accountable. Stated more simply, the goal is to align authority and accountability. School empowerment is possible only when there is transparency (i.e., ready access to relevant information such as the available budget and how it is being spent).

Excerpts from Honolulu Star-Advertiser editorial (10/2/2014), several days before the trip:

The birth of a new public-education think tank in Hawaii represents the evolution of thought to action, as critics of Hawaii’s centralized Department of Education have galvanized current Board of Education members, DOE administrators, principals and teachers to find out more about reforms that would invest more authority in the educators actually interacting with students and parents at the school level.

The creation of the Education Institute of Hawaii rightly moves the subject of school empowerment squarely into the community realm, expanding a much-needed conversation This renewed focus on decentralizing the state office is overdue.

School empowerment means that the people closest to the students have the most say about how campuses are run. This philosophy aligns authority and accountability, and is achieved only when a school district operates with a high level of transparency, with ready access to information about financial, human and other resources.

[A] diverse 27-member delegation that will spend fall break visiting school districts in Canada, California and Nevada that have reorganized in ways that measurably improve educational outcomes for students — or that have tried and failed to do so.

Learning from others' setbacks may be as instructive as visiting districts that have successfully transformed themselves, especially for educators and administrators from Hawaii, who work for a single, state-funded school district that is unique in structure and the ninth-largest in the nation.

School empowerment efforts have progressed in fits and starts before in Hawaii, but never achieved full flight. The fact-finding mission should quickly bring DOE and BOE leadership up to speed on the importance of ensuring that the central office serves the schools' needs, rather than the other way around, and propelling the broader conversation. To that end, the delegation received some reading material ahead of the Oct. 6-10 trip, "10 Lessons from New York City Schools: What Really Works to Improve Education," which emphasizes how crucial it is to:

- » *Invest in leadership*
- » *Devolve responsibility, resources and authority to schools*
- » *Make everyone directly responsible for student performance*
- » *Partner with the private sector*
- » *Reform the central office*
- » *Be bold!*

On that penultimate point, the 2013 guide published by Columbia University's Teachers College Press is unequivocal, asserting that "the most egregious error made by superintendents and school reformers is the attempt to reform schools without simultaneously reforming the central office."

The travel delegation's unanimous statement:

Shortly after returning home, the group met twice, for several hours each time, to see if they could agree on a joint statement. All 27 eventually agreed to the following joint statement, which appeared in the Honolulu Star-Advertiser on Oct. 30, 2014:

Members of the travel delegation discussed "school empowerment" in pre-trip meetings, but at that time lacked a common understanding of what the term can mean. If someone had asked us then about the need for major reform to Hawaii's Department of Education, our responses would have varied considerably. As explained below, that has changed.

The trip, during Hawaii's fall school break, consisted of wall-to-wall meetings with district officials and school personnel daily, then debriefing sessions each evening. We ate all meals together and grumbled together about the grueling travel schedule.

Yet the 27 of us returned home feeling exhilarated, inspired and empowered by the experience. We have seen, heard and been touched by school empowerment and know that it works to create and support classrooms where students thrive in the empowered learning environment.

A school empowerment system requires a philosophical shift. There become only two categories of workers: those who work directly with students, and those who support the efforts of those who work directly with students.

In short, everyone's primary job is to ensure a quality education for every child. School empowerment recognizes the uniqueness of each school community and understands that one size rarely fits all.

For each principal, school empowerment means more than just greater control over financial and staffing decisions. It also means engaging the entire school community—teachers, parents, librarians, cafeteria workers, custodians, everyone who see the students daily—in meaningful discussions about spending, staffing, and curricular and instructional decisions.

Empowered schools model shared values such as collaboration, transparency, integrity, equity and life-long learning. They embrace clarity of responsibility and accountability for their decisions, especially those that focus on student achievement.

Statewide policies and standards continue to be necessary, and support services continue to be provided by support staff outside the schools when that promotes effectiveness and efficiency. There also must be a systemwide commitment to capacity-building for both instructional and non-instructional leadership. And work in the state DOE continues to be critically important in providing the high-quality education deserved by every student.

But because the schools are where teachers and students interact on a daily basis, we support a carefully thought-out process giving school-level personnel more power than they currently have over resource allocation and instructional decisions, along with mechanisms to ensure accountability.

Empowerment and accountability must go hand-in-hand and be properly aligned. For example, it would not be fair (or effective) to hold school-level personnel accountable for results without first empowering them to achieve the desired results.

The timing for school empowerment is good. Each of Hawaii's four gubernatorial candidates has talked favorably about it, and the new governor will fill vacancies on the school board as they occur.

School empowerment is multifaceted and nuanced, but we are pleased that the next governor is on record as wanting to see the existing system move in the direction that

we have described generally in this commentary. We, and many others, stand ready to actively engage in this positive process for our children's sake.

First Annual School Empowerment Conference:

Slightly more than 300 educators and community leaders showed up for the First Annual School Empowerment Conference on November 28-29, 2014 (the Friday and Saturday of Thanksgiving weekend) in the cafeteria of Moanalua High School. First Lady Dawn Ige delivered the opening remarks and the keynote speakers were the eight most interesting and dynamic educators that the travel delegation had encountered during the empowerment trip. Positive news coverage and a feature story in the Honolulu Star-Advertiser helped generate the large turnout.

Excerpts from Star-Advertiser article on Nov. 23, 2014, under the headline “Power to the Schools: A new think tank wants principals and teachers in charge, with the state Department of Education serving a supporting role”

The call for school empowerment has intensified over the past year, as dictated 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 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 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....

"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 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."

One hundred and twenty (120) of the 300 registrants completed a lengthy pre-conference survey, and 138 of the attendees submitted a post-conference evaluation afterward. The following are highlights from the post-conference survey:

- Ninety-five percent (95%) of conference attendees agree that, *"A school empowerment system requires a philosophical shift. There become only two categories of workers: (1) those that work directly with students, and (2) those that support the efforts of those who work directly with students. In short, everyone's primary job is to ensure a quality education for every child."*
- Eighty-nine percent (89%) of conference attendees agree that, "as a result of attending the conference, I have a deeper understanding of what is meant by empowerment."
- Eighty-five percent (85%) of conference attendees agree that, *"the primary work of the DOE happens at the school level between students and teachers, and everyone else in the DOE exists to support that activity."*
- Seventy-four percent (74%) of conference attendees selected the topic of trust vs. compliance as being highly relevant for improving public education in Hawaii (pre-conference survey -- 66%)

The 2014 principals survey:

It would make little sense to “transform” a system that is working well, but there is no one, agreed-upon way to determine whether a system is working well. EIH believes a good starting point is to seek input from school-level educators. Do they think the system is working well? With that as the overarching goal, EIH surveyed DOE principals in 2014 and again in 2015. The complete results of both surveys (as mentioned in the above news article) can be found at EIH’s website (<http://www.edthinktankhawaii.org>). Here’s how the Star-Advertiser described the results of the first principals survey in its news coverage on May 15, 2014:

An overwhelming majority of public school principals who responded to an independent survey about their working conditions say they lack the needed support and autonomy to act in the best interests of their schools, but hesitate to speak out for fear of retaliation.

The school leaders say their ability to make decisions at the school level has been stymied by "top-down" management by the Department of Education, and that sweeping academic reforms the state pledged for its federal Race to the Top grant have dragged down morale at their schools.

The anonymous survey was conducted last month A total of 160 principals responded, representing 63 percent of the principals leading the state's 255 public schools. The survey found in part:

» *64.4 percent feel less empowered to implement decisions to help their schools.*

» *87.7 percent say they don't have a "system of support" as required by their collective bargaining agreement.*

» *75.5 percent feel the implementation of Race to the Top reforms, especially the new performance-based evaluation system for teachers, has negatively impacted their schools.*

» *94 percent feel the teacher evaluations have negatively affected morale.*

» *65.5 percent of principals state that they are not able to express their concerns for fear of reprisal or retaliation.*

.... The survey was done informally and anonymously using principals' personal email addresses

"I think principals are crying out," said John Sosa, 71, who retired from Kaiser High School at year-end after 44 years with the DOE. "Study after study after study says empowering schools is really where the change occurs." The state Legislature aimed to do just that a decade ago when in 2004 it passed the education-reform law known as Act 51, which in part gave principals more control over school-level spending.

"Today, 10 years later, things are almost in the total opposite direction. The school system is more centralized, principals are less empowered and that definitely has an impact on student learning," EIH Executive Director Darrel Galera said. "Things won't change until we change the system so that it's not top-down with everyone having to fit into a one-size-fits-all approach. Every community is unique and very diverse."

Galera acknowledged the recent academic reforms may be well-intended, but "if the changes become more important than the people in the system, it's going to be counterproductive. In leadership we talk about establishing a positive culture where people feel creative and inspired to work. That's what I think we need."

Shortly after the above article appeared, 12 retired educators—all of whom had served as a school principal and many had also served as a district superintendent, deputy district superintendent and/or complex area superintendent—wrote a commentary in the Honolulu Advertiser, excerpts from which appear below:

The Star-Advertiser recently alerted the public to discontent among public school principals, via coverage of a critical survey that found 88 percent of 160 principals saying central administration is not providing sufficient support to the schools, and 65 percent fearing retaliation for disagreeing with or questioning systemwide initiatives ("Principals feel they're hamstrung, survey finds," May 15).

A follow-up commentary by four former principals called the current system "dysfunctional" and pressed for school empowerment ("Public school leaders must be empowered to achieve success," Island Voices, May 20); and an editorial called on state Department of Education leadership, school board members and the governor to heed the calls ("Address principals' concerns," Our View, May 21).

A school system that does not embrace what principals and teachers say, and is run on fear of top-down retribution, is sick and in obvious need of major change. The public should be asking, "Exactly what needs to be changed, and who is best situated to make those changes?"

We believe the answer is school empowerment, which starts with decentralization of the system management. School empowerment can be accomplished in a variety of ways, but the bottom line is that central administrators relinquish power and control over resources and serve the schools, rather than the other way around. Empowered schools get a much larger portion of each education dollar for students. And there is much greater transparency. The current system is opaque at best.

With school empowerment, 90 cents of every dollar must be spent at the school level, and parents wanting to know how it affects their child's school have easy access to that information online.

The BOE and a streamlined central administration would continue to set systemwide policies and provide oversight to empowered schools, but each school community would have a reasonable degree of freedom to innovate. Central administration's primary responsibility would be to support the principals and teachers who are responsible for learning in the schools. The nature of that support would be determined by the professionals at each school and be based on the specific needs of those students.

Turning the system right-side up -- making central administration work for the schools rather than the other way around -- would not require new laws.

Press releases from the DOE have routinely portrayed happy principals, happy teachers, happy students and improving test scores. That cannot be squared with the results of the recent principals' survey.

The DOE has used excellence at Waipahu High to "prove" the value of the Race to the Top initiative, despite the fact that Waipahu had not received any "Race" funds nor implemented any "Race" programs. The DOE also has touted a bump in test scores without making clear that students now take tests up to three times rather than once.

Transparency and integrity are essential, as is a culture of high expectations and innovation.....

The 2015 principals survey:

EIH surveyed DOE principals again in March of 2015. The following is from the Star-Advertiser's coverage, which appeared on March 19, 2015:

Most Hawaii public school principals say they still lack the needed support and flexibility to act in the best interests of their schools and students, according to survey results released this week by the Education Institute of Hawaii that mirror widespread concerns raised in a similar survey conducted last year.

Principals say the Department of Education's leadership too often imposes one-size-fits-all reforms that have dampened school morale, citing as examples the implementation of a common set of learning standards across all schools and high-stakes teacher evaluations.

The anonymous survey was conducted via personal email addresses from Feb. 28 to March 15 by the education think tank, the mission of which is to empower principals, teachers, parents and communities to better serve students. Although the published responses are anonymous, each respondent was required to identify herself or himself in order to participate.

A total of 144 principals responded, representing 56 percent of the principals leading the state's 256 public schools. The Education Institute of Hawaii, with a board of directors that includes former DOE executives and educators, found, in part:

» Only 1 in 6 school leaders consider schools "empowered to an appropriate degree."

» Eighty-one percent of principals say they are made to feel like compliance officers rather than leaders.

» Eighty-seven percent of principals say school-level personnel should be able to control the means by which statewide standards and policies are achieved.

» Forty-seven percent of principals say they cannot express concerns or critiques about DOE policies and practices without fear of reprisal, retaliation, or of being unfairly evaluated.

.... "Making systemic progress for our students and educators have come with a lot of growing pains," DOE spokeswoman Donalyn Dela Cruz said by email. "However, we see that children are learning and achieving more and at a higher level of learning. Our focus is to learn from these growing pains, overcome them and continue to do what's right for our students' future."

Dela Cruz said the department solicits feedback from school leaders year-round about student achievement goals and workload issues to help inform decisions and make needed adjustments.

Education Institute of Hawaii President Roberta Mayor, a former educator and executive in the Hawaii and California public school systems, says principals need more decision-making power.

"School principals really have a very important and difficult job. They're trying to do what's right for kids, they're trying to work with their personnel and also need to marshal their financial resources to try to provide the best education for students," said Mayor, who served as superintendent of the Oakland Unified School District, by telephone Wednesday.

"But they don't always have the authority that goes with the responsibility. They're not able to make the kinds of decisions about how best to utilize their resources," she added. "I think if they had the ability to do that to a greater extent, they would feel more empowered."

Ray L'Heureux, vice president of the Education Institute of Hawaii and a former DOE assistant superintendent, says Hawaii's public school system is too centralized.

"Principals need more leeway to make decisions that are the best fit for their schools and communities," L'Heureux said in a phone interview Wednesday. "We need pathways to get to that point, but with a school district as large as ours — ninth largest in the country — and a central office that, in my opinion, is dysfunctional, it's going to be tough to get there."

He and Mayor say the point of the survey is to increase public awareness to help effect positive changes.....

Second Annual School Empowerment Conference:

More than 400 turned out on Sunday, January 24, 2016. The following condensed version of Catherine Payne's presentation appeared in the Star-Advertiser several days prior to the conference:

I have worked in and around the Department of Education for more than 40 years, as a teacher, vice principal and principal. I now serve as a volunteer commissioner for the Hawaii Public Charter School Commission, and as a consultant helping elementary schools prepare for their first accreditation.

Despite all the substantial support I received from colleagues and supervisors, it has always been my students who truly shaped me as an educator. It troubles me greatly that it is the students who are destined to suffer the consequences of what I perceive to be a newly minted dysfunctional system of public education in Hawaii.

It began with top-down dictates that were supposed to send us "racing to the top" in a few short years. The package of reforms included national standards, a dramatic increase in non-diagnostic standardized testing, and high-stakes formulative assessment mechanisms for principals and teachers. The word from above was, "Do exactly what we tell you to do, or else."

Curriculum decisions traditionally made by teams of classroom teachers are now routinely made by experts from central administration and national consulting firms. Never mind the unique needs of a particular school. Professional educators in the schools have lost almost all autonomy in decisionmaking about the core mission of providing instruction to students.

Even worse, schools have increasingly and predictably restructured around non-diagnostic, standardized testing schedules. Subject areas that cannot be tested this way are de-emphasized, even eliminated. Life in the schools now revolves around the next test. Even kindergarten teachers are doing "test prep" with their students.

Principals are spending countless days in training sessions, learning little more than how to comply with the new dictates. Gone is training in instructional leadership — or any kind of leadership. In some schools relationships have become fractured because of a bureaucratic expectation that things “just get done” — never mind that the teachers and principals believe that the changes are disserving the children.

Most frightening to me is that the system has increasingly been recruiting, training and managing new principals in a top-down, command-and-control brand of management.

I worry that we are forgetting that public education is all about people; it is not a business. Children are precious; they should never be treated like widgets on an assembly line.

A great education begins with well-rounded teachers who model in their own actions the skills and characteristics they would like students to develop. Yet top-down management is disempowering school-level professionals and punishing them for anything but blind compliance. This creates a follow-the-script culture in the schools that is the exact opposite of what we should be modeling for the children.

The children see how principals and teachers work with one another, and they sense when adults are saying one thing — “be inquisitive, think critically and take personal responsibility” — but then meekly function in a dysfunctional system that disrespects them and limits their ability to do what they know is best for their students.

There is reason for hope, however: Congress has just passed legislation affecting our nation’s public schools and especially the federal government’s control over public education at the state and district levels. It is an opportunity to shift our mindset from “The feds are making us do it” to “What can we do that will be most meaningful for our students?”

Plus, we now have a governor and chairman of the state Board of Education who both recognize that a wrong turn was taken, and that corrective action begins with school empowerment.

Now is the time to recognize that educational leadership is not power over schools and students. Rather, it is giving power to those in schools to make the decisions that work best for the students in each unique school.

An appointed school board is a big deal:

Prior to 2011, it was impossible to hold any elected politician or political body accountable for the quality of public education in Hawaii. The elected Board of Education appeared to be in charge, but the Legislature and the governor each wielded comparable power. Specifically, the Legislature had then (as it does now) not just the power to determine the level of appropriated

funds, but the added power to limit *how* some portion of the appropriated funds could be spent (i.e., categorical spending, sometimes known as line-item budgeting or earmarking); then the Governor did not just restricted spending occasionally, but selectively—that is, by line item or category, rather than on a lump-sum basis that would allow the BOE or DOE to choose where to make any necessary cuts.³

With three strong-willed, equally powerful political bodies with one arm on the steering wheel, it was impossible for the public to one any one of them accountable for a bad ride. As a former Superintendent once said, “When everyone is in control, no one is in control.”

The Burns task force pointed out 40 years ago that the DOE/BOE that it also made it difficult, if not impossible, for the public to hold anyone accountable:

“The Legislature has the primary power of budgeting for the Department of Education and, consequently, can influence or mandate Department of Education programs, policies, directions, [and] activities very heavily. The Governor exercises this kind of power also with his ability to [release or not to release] funds and the Governor also wields other factors of administrative supremacy that can influence Department of Education operations. The public, therefore, is never sure just who is responsible for a particular decision affecting the Department of Education or who is to be held accountable for its policies.”⁴

Three strong-willed political offices were simultaneously trying to control a state Department of Education that provides tens of thousands of jobs and currently 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.

³ The BOE unsuccessfully sued the Waihee administration in the 1980s, arguing that governor-imposed spending restrictions “destroyed or limited” the DOE's ability to operate the schools effectively. Board of Education vs. Waihee, 70 Haw. 253, 267-268 (1989) (The Supreme Court saw “no reason to believe the Governor's authority ... does not include discretion to restructure ... priorities.”)

⁴ CORE Report, p. A-24

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."

Foundational beliefs:

- The overwhelming majority of public school teachers, principals and other administrators are competent professionals, fully committed to facilitating an outstanding education for every child.
- An unacceptable number of children are not thriving in the current system.
- An unacceptable number of the educators are not thriving in the current system.
- Members of an individual school community, including the students, cannot thrive when day-to-day functions are controlled far from the school, and one-size-fits-all instructional policies prevent teachers and principals from addressing the unique needs of that community and those students.
- Any improvement in the education system will be sustainable only if school personnel feel some level of ownership of the new structure—as well as the responsibility that goes with ownership.
- The pursuit of any changes to the existing system should be research-based and reflect best practices.

Travel Delegation Bio Sketches

- **Duwayne Abe**, Salt Lake Elementary School principal; 2014 State Principal of the Year (Hawaii's National Distinguished Principal); 2014 Masayuki Tokioka Excellence in School Leadership nominee
- **Keith Amemiya**, State Board of Education member; former Executive Director of the Hawaii High School Athletic Association
- **Amy Asselbaye**, State Board of Education member; former Chief of Staff to Gov. Neil Abercrombie and Congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard; parent representative on school community council for Aina Haina Elementary where her three children attend school
- **Brendan Burns**, Aina Haina Elementary School principal; 2008 National Blue Ribbon School and International Baccalaureate Primary Years Program Candidate School
- **Evangeline Casinas**, Salt Lake Elementary School vice principal; 2009 National Board certified teacher; parent of three children in public school
- **Dale Castro**, Mililani Waena Elementary School principal; former State Director of Curriculum and Instruction (Special Education, School Renewal & Redesign, and Focus Schools); Nationally Certified NAESP Principal Mentor; parent of child who attends public school

- **Bebi Davis**, STEM Resource Teacher; 2005 National Milken Education Award Winner; 2009 Hawaii State Teacher of the Year; 2009 Yale University Educator Award
- **Harry Davis**, University of Hawaii Natural Science & Chemistry professor; past UH Faculty Senate chair; 2001 Recipient of UH Board of Regents Medal for Excellence in Teaching; parent of two public school graduates
- **Aloha Dayton**, Personnel Specialist in DOE Office of Human Resources; formerly principal of Leilehua High School and Waialua Intermediate and High School.
- **Darrel Galera**, Education Institute of Hawaii executive director; retired Moanalua High School principal; 2010 Hawaii High School Principal of the Year; former Leeward District deputy superintendent; 2004 Central Oahu District Principal of the Year
- **Lynda Galera**, Moanalua Elementary School principal; parent of a child in public school
- **Michael Harano**, Washington Middle School principal; Middle School Principals Forum chairperson; 2010 Hawaii State National Distinguished Principal; Washington Middle School 1st AVID National Demonstration School in Hawaii; parent of three public school graduates
- **Jan Iwase**, Hale Kula Elementary School principal; 2013 Central District Principal of the Year
- **Donna Lum Kagawa**, Complex Area superintendent for Farrington-Kaiser-Kalani area; former Jarrett Middle School and Hokulani Elementary School principal and head of DOE's professional development and educational research institute
- **Charles Kagawa**, former assistant superintendent, Office of School Facilities and Support Services; former School Business specialist; former acting administrative assistant to the superintendent
- **Barbara Krieg**, Director of Human Resources for the Hawaii Department of Education; formerly Director of Hawaii State Department of Human Resources Development; formerly shareholder/director of Alston Hunt Floyd & Ing law firm
- **Joan Lewis**, Kapolei High School teacher; Hawaii State Teachers Association vice president; 2013 NEA Foundation's Excellence in Teaching Award and 2014 NEA Foundation Global Fellow; foster parent for eight years whose children attended public schools
- **Ray L'Heureux**, former DOE assistant superintendent, Office of School Facilities and Support Services; former commanding officer of Presidential helicopter squadron for Presidents Bush and Obama; 30-year military career included executive positions responsible for strategic and management operations within the Marine Corps and U.S. Pacific Command

- **Roberta Mayor**, former principal at Waianae High School and Waipahu Intermediate; former superintendent of Oakland Unified School District; former Chief Management Analyst for California Fiscal Crisis & Management Assistance Team; parent of two public school graduates
- **Derek Minakami**, Kaneohe Elementary School principal; 2001 State Teacher of the Year, 2001 National Teacher of the Year finalist; parent of two children in public schools
- **Denise Murai**, parent advocate; Parent Community Networking Center coordinator; nationally certified facilitator of Parent Project & Loving Solutions parenting program; parent of three public school graduates
- **Fred Murphy**, Mililani High School principal; Hawaii High School Principals Forum chairperson
- **Steve Nakasato**, Pearl Ridge Elementary School principal; former Curriculum, Instruction and Student Support state director; 2007 Central Oahu District Principal of the Year; Ed.D. Professional Educational Practice; parent of three children in public schools
- **Rick Paul**, principal of Hana High and Elementary School; former DOE Committee on Weights member
- **Randall Roth**, Education Institute of Hawaii president and board chairperson; University of Hawaii Law School professor
- **Art Souza**, Complex Area superintendent for Honokaa-Kealahou-Kohala-Konawaena Area; former Honokaa High and Waikoloa Elementary Schools principal
- **Lisa-Anne Tsuruda**, Mililani High School teacher; 2009 National Milken Award Winner; 2010 Central District Outstanding Educator; National Milken Educators of Hawaii president