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The fundamental problem is a dysfunctional DOE

By Ray L'Heureux and Randall Roth

Most of Hawaii's 12,702 public school teachers and administrators are well trained, hard-working and totally dedicated to their students. They are by far the Department of Education's most valuable resources, and some of them are underpaid.

Even so, we strongly oppose the proposed constitutional amendment that purportedly would increase DOE funding.

First, there is no reason to believe a new dedicated tax would increase education funding by even one penny. Virtually all of Hawaii's dedicated taxes and special funds have turned out to be bait-and-switch ploys. Using the state's transient accommodations tax to fund rail on Oahu is just the latest example.

Second, there is no reason to believe DOE shortcomings are due to inadequate funding. Per-pupil spending in Hawaii — \$13,748 for operations alone as of two years ago — is 17 percent above the national average, placing Hawaii 15th in the nation. If our public-school teachers are not making 17 percent more than the national average, on what is the DOE spending that money?

Third, there is no reason to believe higher teacher pay would make existing teachers more effective. While some of our teachers are outstanding and deserve pay raises, there are others who are overpaid and overprotected. The teachers' union demands that the DOE's very best teachers make no more than its very worst. And it goes to extraordinary lengths

protecting every teacher's job, even those no principal wants to hire or retain but must do so anyway because of the union contract.

Fourth, the perennial teacher shortage could be reduced significantly simply by removing artificial roadblocks. For example, the DOE should welcome the many military spouses, and others, who have taught successfully outside of Hawaii but do not satisfy Hawaii's protectionist rules and mentality.

Fifth, today's DOE is an overly centralized, top-down bureaucracy in which non-school administrators make numerous instructional decisions that teachers are told to implement, and school principals are told to enforce. The guiding star is standardization. Until that changes dramatically, there is no reason to trust this DOE with more tax dollars.

Hawaii's student outcomes, while not easily measured and compared, are disappointing to say the least. Once National Assessment of Educational Progress test results are adjusted for relevant factors such as income, language spoken at home and special needs, Hawaii is last in the nation (see <http://apps.urban.org/features/naep>).

Clearly, though, the problem is not the kids — but the governance structure of our DOE.

Among the reasons why Hawaii's DOE achieves such poor results is that it lacks systemwide transparency and accountability, which would not be tolerated in any other state, where there's always a State Educational Agency (SEA) to crack down on the offending Local Educational Agency (LEA). In Hawaii — and only in Hawaii — the DOE is both SEA and LEA. Don't hold your breath waiting for our DOE to crack down on itself.

Because transparency and accountability are overused abstractions, we offer several examples.

Hawaii's DOE currently describes its annual operating budget as “nearly \$2 billion,” but that number is deceptive. It does not include more than a billion dollars in other education expenditures, such as teacher fringe benefits.

The current starting salary in Hawaii for a teacher with just a bachelor's degree is \$50,000. Because the fringe benefit rate in Hawaii for state employees is 56.48 percent, an employee paid a salary of \$50,000 costs the state \$78,240 each year. The DOE also likes to compare teachers on 10-month contracts with other professionals who are on 12-month contracts.

And, what kind of DOE could have \$3 billion at its disposal each year, yet, as some say, fail to provide up-to-date textbooks and essential supplies for every classroom?

Before even thinking about creating a new tax, Hawaii needs to transform its top-down bureaucracy into a schools-centered system in which teachers determine how best to satisfy statewide educational standards and policies; principals regularly engage their school communities in discussions about spending, staffing and curricular decisions; student aspirations beyond high school determine student-centered learning programs; and school-level personnel can look to the private sector for support services if the DOE administration's services are substandard.

This call to transform the DOE into a schools-centered system comes at an auspicious time. Gov. David Ige has publicly called for DOE transformation to schools-centered governance, and the school board's chairperson, Catherine Payne, also has expressed strong support for this. Superintendent Christina Kishimoto has expressed positive thoughts about school empowerment.

In short, the political stars are aligned.

Once Hawaii's K-12 education system has been transformed, each school's teachers and principals will know exactly what resources are available and have a meaningful say as to how those resources are utilized. Budgets can then be created from the bottom up, based on each school's needs.

If this newfound transparency and school-level empowerment reveal a legitimate need for more funding, we will happily lead the effort to secure the needed amount, even if it requires higher taxes.

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Ray L'Heureux is a former assistant superintendent in the Hawaii Department of Education; Randall Roth is a professor emeritus of law at the University of Hawaii at Manoa and co-founder of the Education Institute of Hawaii.

ON THE NOV. 6 BALLOT: The proposed amendment to the state Constitution asks: "Shall the Legislature be authorized to establish, as provided by law, a surcharge on investment real property to be used to support public education?"

<http://www.staradvertiser.com/2018/09/16/editorial/insight/con-schools-problem-fundamentally-is-dysfunctional-doe/>