

Influential essay helps propel demand for improvement

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Credit Randall Roth for debunking the pervasive myths that have helped derail public education reform in Hawaii in the past.

The University of Hawaii law professor, who co-authored the "Broken Trust" essay published in the Honolulu Star-Bulletin in 1997 that spurred major changes at Kamehameha Schools/

Bishop Estate, hopes his latest work has the same galvanizing effect on Hawaii's public school system.

His 48-page essay "Public Education Hawaii: Past, Present and Future" has been percolating in the community since he presented it last August at a conference marking 50 years of statehood and published an abridged version in the Star-Bulletin the same week, with a link to the full text at <http://www.hsblinks.com/mu>.

The essay - which focuses on the statewide school district's "flawed governance structure" as its "primary and fundamental problem" - has been read, commented on and forwarded by educators, parents, policymakers, lawmakers and others interested in improving Hawaii's public school system.

The work influenced former Hawaii governors George Ariyoshi, John Waihee and Ben Cayetano (all Democrats, while Roth advised Republican Gov. Linda Lingle during her first year in office), who repeated key assertions this month as they called for replacing the elected state Board of Education with one appointed by the governor, investing more authority and accountability in school principals and increasing class time. (See their proposal at www.hawaiichildrenfirst.org).

One of the ways Roth is reshaping the debate is by debunking conventional wisdom about what causes Hawaii public school students to lag the national average on a variety of standardized tests, an important barometer of student progress and achievement. Among the myths he busts:

» Private school drain: At 15.6 percent of school-age children, Hawaii does not have the highest percentage of students in private schools. That percentage ranked 12th among states in 2006-2007, "hardly an explanation for test scores in the bottom tier nationally."

» Poverty (an accepted predictor of student performance): The percentage of poor students in

Hawaii is lower than the national average, as measured by qualification in the free lunch program; 28.86 percent of all public school students qualify in Hawaii, compared to 31.89 percent nationally.

» Special education: The percentage of special-needs students in Hawaii also is lower than the national average, 11.67 percent versus 15.74 percent.

» Immigrant students: 8.67 percent of Hawaii public school students have limited English proficiency, much lower than many other states. In California, for example, the percentage is 25.6 percents.

» Ethnic diversity: Each ethnic group in Hawaii public schools performs worse than the same group does on the mainland.

» Education funding: Hawaii's per-pupil spending and average teacher and principal salaries are all higher than the national average, even when adjusted for Hawaii's cost of living.

But perhaps the biggest public service Roth performs is in shattering the absurd but consistent spin that paints critics of the Department of Education as opponents of public education, or as maligning teachers, principals or even the students themselves.

He does it by hammering home the point, on page after page, that the ones truly maligning the public schools and the people in them are those who make excuses for a governance system identified for the past 50 years as dysfunctional.

"Critics of the system are oftentimes accused of being critics of the kids, or critics of the teachers. And I see it just the opposite," Roth, whose four children attended public elementary schools in Honolulu, said in an interview. "I think we've got terrific people in a lousy system that is holding them back. We have people - students, teachers, principals - who are just capable of so much more than what the current system allows them to do."

Roth, who contributed to the "Price of Paradise" books and radio show popular in the 1990s and was honored by the city in 2005 for lasting contributions to Honolulu and its people, said that he considered his essay "a citizen's handbook for improving public education."

He hopes to have it published in "mini-book" form, but in the meantime, anyone interested in reading it online or downloading a copy can do so here.