

Editorials

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[OUR OPINION]

Education reform requires everyone's support

THE ISSUE

Governor Lingle unveils her plans for reforming the public school system.

NO ONE disputes that Hawaii's public schools need improvement, but there has been no meeting of political minds on what shape that reform will take. Governor Lingle, however, knows what she wants and, to that end, has appointed a 22-member committee to promote her agenda to decentralize the Department of Education, establish local school boards, place budget authority and accountability in the hands of principals and tie spending to the educational needs of each student.

It's a promising plan; proponents say it has produced remarkable results in communities in Canada and the mainland. But if such sweeping changes are to be made in Hawaii, the governor will need state lawmakers, teachers, administrators and other education officials, as well as parents and members of the public to sign on.

Lingle, in another of her signature high-profile events, last week rolled out her education crusade in a forum that featured management guru William Ouchi, a professor in corporate renewal at UCLA, who advocates decentralized school systems in which principals approach their jobs as chief executive officers.

As CEOs, principals would determine how to spend money budgeted for their schools as they see fit and would answer directly to local school boards and parents. The idea makes sense, bringing financial decision-making to the school level.

How much is allotted to a school would be based on the so-called "weighted student formula" that Ouchi earlier this year described to enthusiastic response from lawmakers, educators and administration officials. The concept, which the DOE had considered several years ago, assigns each pupil a certain amount of money based on his or her educational needs. Children who require special education, bilingual services or who are from a low-income family would qualify for more funds. A school's budget would be the total of all of its students' allotments.

Ouchi, in a presentation to the Star-Bulletin's editorial board, said he envisions the formula and school choice as key to education reform in Hawaii. Because the funds are attached to students, they may take their funds with them to another school if their learning needs are not being met. The practice places the power for reform in the hands of each child, Ouchi said.

It also may encourage schools to develop certain "specialties" that will attract students who require or desire them. For example, if a school has successful programs for students who need bilingual education, parents would be inclined to enroll their bilingual children there. The formula also would provide equity for children who choose public charter schools instead of traditional education.

Although the funding formula was warmly embraced by House Democrats, teachers, DOE officials and the Republican governor, Lingle's reform proposals met a cool reception during the legislative session. The forum and committee appear charted to build public support for her plan while putting pressure on lawmakers as well as DOE officials, who were not invited to the events announcing the plan.

Lingle said she excluded them "by design" because her goal "is to achieve something here that the stakeholders may not agree with, not today and maybe not ever."

The governor's assessment may be correct, but she is mistaken if she believes she does not need their support. Education is a participatory venture. It involves all levels of the school system from superintendent to janitor. Its "stakeholders" include not only the DOE and the Legislature, but every business person and employer in every industry in Hawaii and all members of the public whether or not they have children in the public schools.

Ouchi says school systems work best from the bottom up. As the governor's newest consultant, he should relay that message to his boss.