



HAWAI'I EDUCATIONAL POLICY CENTER

Informing the Education Community

Perspectives #6 **Act 51 Myths**

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[Perspectives are quick takes on Reinventing Education (Act 51) issues that are in transition. These issues will be revisited periodically as new developments warrant.]

Former business CEO Randy Moore oversees the implementation of Act 51, the Reinventing Education Act of 2004. Act 51 is the blueprint for on-going education reform in Hawai'i, and as such, all of us should know about it and care about it.

“There’s a great deal of misunderstanding about Act 51,” Moore says, and he should know. In addition to being the project manager for school reform, he’s also the Department of Education’s resident mythbuster!

So what are the myths Moore is trying to bust?

Myth #1 is that Hawai'i's public schools can't improve without more funding. Closely related is Myth #2—Hawai'i's schools can't improve because of the constraints put upon them by union contracts, state procurement laws, etc.

Do schools anywhere ever have enough money? For Moore, the better question is what can schools do differently with the money they have? As Superintendent Pat Hamamoto puts it, “Our schools must change the way they deliver services.” Act 51 doesn't change the amount of money available to schools, but it allocates it in a different way based on characteristics that have an impact on learning exhibited by each student attending a school.

The question Moore poses concerning Myth # 2 is, “If all schools have the same union contracts and procurement constraints, why are some schools doing better than others?” Moore believes, “Some schools have done a better job because they've focused on student achievement more effectively, not because they have more resources or fewer constraints.”

Myth # 3 asks why change the existing way funds are allocated to schools? Isn't it fair the way it's currently being done?

No, is Moore's answer. Under the current system, schools with similar student characteristics (for example, about the same percent of economically disadvantaged students and English as second language learners) receive different per pupil allocations, the result of years of funding inequities among Hawai'i's schools. This difference in funding between similar schools can amount to \$300,000 or more.

Moore believes the new weighted student formula system (WSF) will bring fairness and transparency to school funding. It will establish a base per pupil allocation and then add additional funding for students who participate in the free or reduced lunch program (a measure of economic disadvantage), students who are English language learners and students in special education.

Under WSF, some schools will gain funding and some will lose funding as equity and fairness are brought into the system. All must develop an Academic and Financial Plan with in-input from teachers, staff, parents, community members and students to decide the best way to spend the school's allocation in order to advance student achievement

Myth #4. Since principals with help from their School Community Councils will decide which programs will be funded at their school, will good programs and even athletics disappear at some schools?

Rather than receiving a top-down fiat about which programs must be offered, schools will be able to pick and choose from among a menu of programs, exercising school-level decision making. "Why would a good program disappear," Moore asks? "Wouldn't a school want to continue a program with demonstrated success?" He adds that private schools provide athletics as part of educating the whole child, so why wouldn't the public schools do the same?

Myth #5 is that schools losing funding under WSF will be forced to cut teaching positions, particularly non-core teachers such as fine arts.

Moore believes that schools losing funding under WSF will ask themselves, "How must we organize differently with fewer resources to still improve student achievement?" Schools will most likely find savings in non-instructional costs rather than by reducing the number of teachers.

Reactions/Thoughts Related to Moore's "Act 51 Myths"

Informed stakeholders are essential if we are to have productive community involvement in school reform, and Randy Moore is doing an excellent job of dispelling some Act 51 myths that could hamper effective dialogue. Yet, important questions remain.

Is education funding inadequate or is the education system's use of these funds ineffective? Is it a combination of both? Can an ineffective system train its principals to be effective entrepreneurs? Might Hawai'i's business community assist principals as they transform into the CEO's of their schools?

A lesson learned from other school systems using WSF such as Edmonton, Seattle, and Houston is that a different funding allocation methodology such as WSF is not what brings about improved student achievement. Rather, "this change allows for the unleashing of the creative potential in principals." (DOE Weighted Student Formula Feasibility Study, 2003). Are Hawai'i's principals ready to assume greater responsibilities? Superintendent Hamamoto believes the state DOE must "prepare the system for independence." How will progress toward this goal be measured?

During the 2004 legislative session, a reason cited for keeping Hawai‘i’s unitary system intact and not breaking it up into multiple school districts was the fact that our system is fair. That is to say, schools in Hawai‘i’s wealthier areas receive no more funding because of their location than schools in poorer areas. Now, however, the DOE/BOE says our statewide education system has unfairly distributed resources to its schools over many years. For instance, in comparing two elementary schools with almost identical enrollments, one has 3.5 FTE fewer basic needs teachers than the other. Two middle schools of similar size have a difference of 4.5 FTE non-teaching staff (clerks, clerk typists, custodians, etc.). Staffing formulas (both DOE-determined and contractual) spell out staffing ratios, so why do these inequities exist? The DOE acknowledged several years ago “the wide disparity in classified office staffing among schools is conspicuous.”

If funding inequities among Hawai‘i’s schools have existed for years, why didn’t the DOE or the BOE or the legislature address this problem?

Now “smoothing out funding inequities among schools” is being cited as a prime reason for implementing WSF, though this argument was not even mentioned by the DOE during its presentations at the first five meetings of the BOE Ad Hoc Oversight Committee on the Reinventing Education Act of 2004.

Under WSF will we trade one set of inequities for another? WSF should bring transparency to school funding, but the “horse trading” may then move to which programs will be in the “lump” over which principals will have spending discretion and which will be in the “protected” categorical funds pot (these funds must be spent in specified ways). Regardless of the merit of individual programs, lobbying has already resulted in four student activity programs being moved out of the lump and into the protected pot. Why is athletics in the protected pot but world language programs in the lump? Why is the position of athletic director in the protected pot but the position of student activities coordinator in the lump? If the intent of WSF is to give principals and their School Community Councils maximum discretion in deciding how resources will be spent, then the legislature and others must stop the practice of categorical funding.

Finally, why are we taking money away from schools that have managed with great effort to do well? Is this a classic case of “robbing Peter to pay Paul”? The argument that middle schools in the aggregate, for instance, will neither gain nor lose money means nothing to the middle school that will lose almost \$600,000 or 27% of its current allocation under WSF. Does this pass the common sense test?

In future *Perspectives*, we will try to answer the questions raised in this article and other questions related to Act 51. Please send your thoughts on Act 51 to aloharuth@verizon.net.