



HAWAII EDUCATIONAL POLICY CENTER
Informing the Education Community

Perspectives #16

Change Leadership Group: Reinventing South Kona Schools

July 17, 2006

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“The (school) system is obsolete, and we need to reinvent it, not reform it,” says Tony Wagner, co-director of the Change Leadership Group (CLG) at Harvard’s Graduate School of Education.

For the past year, six school principals in South Kona, working with their complex area superintendent and with CLG, have been quietly reinventing their schools. Their collective goal? To improve their skills as change leaders by learning and sharing best practices related to transforming their schools.

The Hawaii Change Leaders pilot project is not only about individual school change; it’s about K–12 change. It’s about an entire complex made up of a high school, middle school and elementary schools working together to do things differently. It’s about principals who have been trained to lead schools *as they are* learning to lead schools toward what they should be.

Participants include complex superintendent Art Souza, school renewal specialist Sandra Taosaka, and principals Shawn Suzuki (Konawaena High School), Nancy Soderberg (Konawaena Middle School), Lyndia Uchimura (Ho’okena Elementary), Faye Ogilvie (Honaunau Elementary), Claire Yoshida (Konawaena Elementary) and Tim Lino (Ke Kula O Ehunuikaimalino).

Operating as a “community of practice,” the South Kona principals are learning together on the job, sharing questions, ideas and practices. “It’s risk taking work,” Souza says, “asking questions we don’t have all the answers for.” How do school leaders encourage and support teaching and learning? What does rigorous instruction look like? How do principals help their schools feel an urgency to do things differently, especially when schools are traditionally “immune to change”?

These are some of the questions the Hawaii Change Leaders group tackles and answers collectively. They are focused on the on-going and continuous improvement of instruction and on creating a school climate of not just “buy-in” but “ownership” of this process by teachers, students and parents.

Group members support their colleagues by doing “focused walks” at each other’s schools, asking questions and offering suggestions. All too often schools and leaders operate in isolation, and Wagner and the CLG believe “isolation is the enemy of improvement.”

So do we see improvements at the six South Kona schools? “These are different schools than a year ago,” Souza states. There is a “thinking culture” at each of them and rigorous instruction. He believes the schools’ test scores will show this improvement when published by the DOE in July.

What are the next steps for this pioneering group? All eight will return to Harvard next fall for further study, and the principals have identified and begun to work with 24 teacher leaders, 4 from each school, who will co-lead the school transformation process. Souza reports this change model will next be piloted by North Kona schools and principals.

What does this have to do with Act 51, the Reinventing Education Act of 2004? Though most of us associate Act 51 with school funding reform, specifically the controversial weighted student formula, the act is also about empowering principals—giving principals greater authority and responsibility and requiring greater accountability.

“It is the legislature’s intent,” Act 51 reads, “to place a far greater number of decisions ...directly in the hands of individual schools and their leaders... [and] principals will be empowered to act as the educational leaders of their schools.” This is exactly what the six South Kona principals are doing.

Superintendent Pat Hamamoto believes Act 51 is about “unleashing the creative potential in principals,” and she supports the Hawaii Change Leaders project because it assists principals in developing their capacities as instructional leaders and school transformers. Others supporting this innovative project are the Harold K.L. Castle Foundation, the Hawaiian Educational Council and 3Point Consulting.