



# HAWAII EDUCATIONAL POLICY CENTER

*Informing the Education Community*

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## **Act 51 Requires Change**

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New Year's resolutions are all about change, and this explains why they're so hard to keep. We know how to do what we do, the way we've always done it. To change what we do is neither easy nor comfortable.

We see this in our own lives, and we see it in our state's efforts to reinvent education. 2004 saw the governor focusing our state on education reform, the legislature crafting a comprehensive reform package, and the Department of Education (DOE) showing a willingness to change how it operates.

The Reinventing Education Act (Act 51) passed by the 2004 legislature is about change. It mandates the Department of Education to make the hardest change of all—to change its mindset, to begin doing business in a different way.

The act's intent is to move decision-making from the state DOE down to the local school level. It gives principals some form of control over 70% of the DOE's operating budget (excluding debt servicing and capital improvement projects). In addition, a lump-sum amount of money will go to each school based on characteristics of students who attend that school. For instance schools that have non-English speaking students, students who qualify for free or reduced lunch, a poverty indicator, and students with special education needs will receive more funding.

Changing top-down management to bottom-up management entails a major adjustment of roles and responsibilities, but an even greater adjustment of thinking.

The mechanics of school staffing illustrate this. Should schools have free rein in making staffing decisions as long as state and federal legislation, court mandates and contractual obligations are met, or should the state DOE continue to set staffing parameters and require certain positions at the school level? Currently, excluding teachers, only a principal and a SASA (School Administrative Service Assistant) are required.

With top-down management, schools are allotted staff based on a state staffing ratio. In other words, the state DOE gives to or takes away staff positions at schools based on enrollment, available funding, and precedent. That a principal might decide an additional classroom teacher would make more sense for his or her school than, say, a counselor, was not a possibility.

With bottom-up management, principals and their School Community Councils, (advisory groups made up of teachers, students, staff, parents and community members) will make decisions about staffing and programs at their own school. Their decisions will be judged against whether there is demonstrable improvement in student achievement.

Will we see in 2005 a change at the state DOE from top-down to bottom-up management? The answer will depend on whether the DOE can make the transition from controlling the reins to letting them go, from enforcing uniformity to allowing flexibility, from being responsible for to working collaboratively with schools. One of the biggest changes of all will entail viewing principals as the true instructional leaders and CEOs of their schools, not just the plant managers.

Like each one of us, the state DOE knows how to do what it does, the way it's always done it. It is demonstrating a good faith willingness to learn new ways. So while some of us struggle with New Year's resolutions relating to taking control—controlling what we eat, how much we exercise, etc.—the state DOE must struggle with giving up control.

I wish all of us good luck with our resolutions in 2005 and hope we remember that change happens incrementally over time, not overnight.

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