

# **Power, Trust, and Resources: Why Act 51 Challenges the Hawaii Department of Education**

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It is a great pleasure for me to visit with you this afternoon on the subject of public education. I am in my fourth year as a public educator. I think I've learned almost as much in the last four years as I did in the previous 40, and I am still learning every day. It has been absolutely fascinating to have seen the Department of Education first from the classroom and now from the superintendent's perch.

I know there are a few visitors today, so let me begin by describing Act 51. It was passed by the 2004 Hawaii legislature over the governor's veto. It is a comprehensive, but not complete, school reform measure. The legislature, somewhat grandly, called it the "Reinventing Education Act of 2004."

Act 51 is based on the premise that if the state sets overall standards about what students should know, be able to do, and care about, student achievement will improve if [two things]: (i) the decisions about how to improve student achievement are made at the school level and (ii) schools are held accountable for student achievement.

Act 51 first changes the way resources are allocated to schools. A variety of formulas, some written and some not, have heretofore determined how much each school gets. Act 51 provides that schools will get resources based on student needs, the weighted student formula. Research shows that to get the same level of student proficiency, compared to "plain vanilla" or "normal" students, you need to put more resources (think "money") into students whose home language is not English, and students from poor families, and students with physical, mental, or emotional baggage. The weighted student formula assigns a cost to educate to each student, based on the student's characteristics. If I am a \$8,000 student and you are a \$7,000 student, the school I go to will get \$8,000 and the school you go to will get \$7,000.

So Act 51 changes the way resources get to the schools. Act 51 also pushes decision-making down to the schools. To oversimplify (but not much), now the state not only tells the schools what to do, it tells them how to do it. When fully implemented, the state will tell the schools what academic performance is expected of their students, but it will leave it to the schools to determine how to do it.

Why is this so challenging? It sounds pretty straightforward. And it would be, if we were starting from scratch. But we're starting with a century and a half of tradition. The change mandated by Act 51 will turn the Department of Education upside down. It will end command-and-control, where not only what to do, but how to do it, are determined at the state office and communicated down through the organization to the schools. In the Department today, most people expect someone else to tell them what to do.

Even today, the principal is the single most critical individual for student success on a school campus, more important than any single teacher. Under Act 51, the principal's job becomes even more important, and more burdensome.

As a basis for planning, each school will analyze the data about its students – demographics, test scores, attendance at school, discipline history.

- Principals must know what data to analyze and how to analyze it,
- They must identify alternative research-based strategies for improving student achievement, given the student data. Some of these strategies are curricular – what do you teach? and some are instructional – how do you teach it?
- They must select the preferred strategies, justify the selections, and build an academic plan around the strategies.
- They must prepare a financial plan (a budget) based on the academic plan. Overall, there is no new money for the schools. Under the weighted student formula, some schools will get more resources than they now have, and some will get fewer.
- They must monitor student data and financial data during implementation.
- They must work with school community councils, which Act 51 says must be established in every school.

- And they must work under performance contracts that Act 51 says must include sanctions for poor performance as well as rewards for good performance.

None of these have heretofore been required of principals. None of the 257 principals who ascended to their positions before this law was enacted last spring had an expectation of these requirements, and many do not have experience that would provide them the skills they need to be immediately proficient principals in this new environment.

So the principals have to change.

The state office also has to change.

- \* Under Act 51, the Department of Education will in five months assume responsibility from the Department of Human Resources Development for the personnel management functions of 6,000 DOE civil service employees.

- \* 200 employees responsible for the construction, repair, and major maintenance of school facilities will transfer from the Department of Accounting and General Services to the Department of Education, also in five months.

- \* Resources that are now allocated to schools by program managers in the state office will instead go directly to the schools via the weighted student formula.

- \* Schools will be allowed to purchase services from vendors other than the state office. State office services will need to be competitive with outside vendors in quality and price. Price – the state office has never even estimated what its individual services to the schools cost.

- \* State office budget, accounting, personnel, and technology systems will be revised to reflect school-based decision-making.

- \* State office staff will shrink as personnel move to the district offices and the schools.

Act 51 does not talk much about teachers, except to provide financial support for those teachers who apply for national certification. But for student achievement to show significant improvement, teachers are going to have to change. Gone will be the days of teachers closing their classroom doors after the bell has rung and being king or queen of their realm for the next 45 minutes of class. Teachers will be observed regularly in their

classrooms by principals and other teachers who form professional learning communities dedicated to improving instructional effectiveness. Although Act 51 mandates performance contracts only for principals, I think the day will come when the legislature will mandate performance contracts for teachers.

Act 51 is silent about any changes at the Board of Education. But a high-performing Board of Education will hasten the benefits of Act 51. The Board should determine which handful of significant indicators to watch, monitor outcomes, speak with one voice, support the superintendent's efforts, celebrate success, and encourage continuous improvement.

And even the Legislature should change. It should get out of the business of micro-managing the Department. At present there are more than 300 federal and state categorical funds that go to the Board of Education. A categorical fund is money that goes for education, but it must be spent for the purposes set forth by the legislature, or by the Congress. Examples are funds for vocational education, for Hawaiian studies, for ROTC, for school lunches, for athletics, and so on – more than 300! The legislature should appropriate funds to the Board of Education and let the Board determine how best to spend the money.

In short, everyone will have to change, and change is uncomfortable. It's one thing to say that you have to change, and you have to change, and you have to change. But do I have to change?

Not only do roles and responsibilities change, but power shifts dramatically. Power flows to the schools, and specifically to the school principals, and it flows from all the layers above the schools that now have it. People are reluctant to give up power.

Trust is also involved. Categorical funds exist in part because the Congress, the legislature, and the general public do not trust educators to spend money in the best way for students. Special interest groups don't trust the Department to do the right thing, so they lobby for categorical funds for programs that help targeted groups of students. Program managers at the state level in the Department of Education don't trust those at the school level to do the right thing. For the full benefits of school-based decision-making to be realized, lots of people need to give up power, and they need to trust the schools to do the right thing. This is not blind trust – schools are

accountable for student achievement, and school employees' jobs are at risk if funds are inappropriately or ineffectively spent. Under Act 51 schools will be accountable for student learning outcomes, where now they are only responsible for spending the money the way someone above them says it should be spent.

I've talked about power and trust, but it's also about resources. While there is absolutely no question that we can improve student achievement with the resources we already have, we are not going to reach the level of performance that we as a community should expect unless we spend more money on public education. A study commissioned by the Board of Education and released last week reported that if Hawaii utilized best educational practices, we would need to spend an additional \$1,500 per student per year. We now spend about \$9,000 per student. This is substantially less than Punahou, Iolani, and Kamehameha spend. Their per-student costs, which exceed their tuitions, begin at \$13,000 and head north.

People say, "but there are private schools whose tuition is only \$6,000, and they deliver a decent education. Why should the DOE cost so much?" Consider this: the private schools are populated by students who generally speak English at home, who do not suffer emotional or mental handicaps, and whose parents believe education is so important they are willing to pay taxes to support the public schools and also pay private school tuition. Public schools are disproportionately populated by challenging students and challenging families. Because of this, public schools ought to be the most costly of all.

I close with a caution. Substantial change is needed to get us high performing schools. This change does not come quickly. The Department of Education is the largest enterprise in Hawaii, by far. We have 24,000 full-time employees, about six times the size of the largest private employer in the state. In addition we have another 92,000 part-time positions – substitute teachers, part-time teachers, after-school workers, coaches, etc. I asked one of the DOE consultants, Harvard School of Education professor Tony Wagner, how long it would take a highly effective principal to turn around a low-performing school. His answer: five years. But we do not have a large stable of highly effective principals, with the skills we now expect them to have. So before the five years can start, we need to develop highly effective principals. And highly effective teachers do not develop overnight. When I started teaching this school year, I said to one of my

experienced colleagues, “This year, for the first time, when the bell rings and class starts, I am reasonably confident that I know what’s going to happen for the next 57 minutes [we had 57-minute periods]. Her reply: “That’s because, when the bell rings, your students for the first time are reasonably confident that they know what’s going to happen for the next 57 minutes.” Most teachers are slow learners like me. It takes most of us five years to get up to speed.

So it’s going to take us some time. Sometimes, it feels like we’re trying to get the U.S.S. Missouri into Pearl Harbor to its berth on Ford Island. The ship’s engine is dead, and all we’ve got is a canoe paddle.

I hope I have left you with several thoughts:

- 1) “Insanity is doing things the way they have always been done and expecting the results to be different.” To improve student achievement, we must do things differently.
- 2) The main thing Act 51 does differently to improve student achievement is to have the schools decide, based on what they know about their students and about educational research, how to do it.
- 3) Act 51 turns the Department of Education upside down, resulting in significant transfers of power, and requiring significant levels of trust that those newly empowered will do the right thing.
- 4) Despite a budget that looks large, the Department is short of resources.
- 5) Significant improvement will not happen overnight. I’m an optimist, and I say, “10 years.”
- 6) Finally, and this is almost an aside in the context of Act 51, but it’s the most important message I can bring you. Each student is a human being, worthy of respect and support. The purpose of education is not to train workers for the future. Education is about empowerment. You don’t send your own children to school to be a trained worker for the future. You send your children to school to empower them to be all they can be. We should expect no less of our public schools for all our children. We need to improve, we must improve, and we will improve. But it’s easy to get swept up in measuring student test scores, and measuring school quality by

comparing student test scores. We need to measure quality also by the kind of people we graduate from our schools. Are they resourceful, inquisitive, collaborative individuals, capable of a life of continuous personal improvement? It was Albert Einstein who said, “Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts.”

I know I can count on you to support us on our journey of improvement.

Thank you.