In My Opinion

State DOE structure is dysfunctional

A recent survey of public school principals suggests that the governance structure and culture of Hawaii’s Department of Education are dysfunctional.

School principals say they need more flexibility in determining who will or will not work in their schools, and the authority to seek support services outside the DOE to better serve the children. My own experiences convince me that their criticism of the existing system is spot on.
While serving as a Marine, I had many positions of responsibility, including in strategic and management operations in the U.S. Pacific Command, and in command of the presidential helicopter squadron where I was responsible for the safety and transportation of President George W. Bush and then President Barack Obama.

Following that 30-year career, I happily signed on as the assistant superintendent in charge of facilities and support services for the Hawaii State Department of Education. My children had graduated from public high schools in Hawaii, and I saw the DOE position as an opportunity to serve the people — and especially the children — of my adopted home.

Although not an educator by training, I knew that the DOE’s operational and educational components would have to be inextricably connected and mutually supported if the children were to be served effectively.

Hawaii’s DOE is the ninth-largest school district in the country and the only one that encompasses an entire state. With more than 30,000 employees, annual expenditures of $1.8 billion and 256 schools on seven islands, clear lines of authority — and the close alignment of authority with accountability — are critically important.

More than two years in the state office convinced me that meaningful progress will be impossible without major change in the DOE’s governance structure and culture.

We currently have the opposite of a schools-centered or schools-empowered system. Rather than empower school-level professionals to use their share of system resources to best serve the children in their respective schools, the central office functions as though only it knows what is best for the 185,000 children in Hawaii’s DOE.

To stay in the good graces of central administrators, principals must function more like compliance managers than leaders of their respective school communities. Principals who buck the system do so at considerable risk. Tellingly, only two in five principals said in the recent survey that they can express concern or critique DOE policies and practices without fear of reprisal, retaliation, or being unfairly evaluated.

When school-level leaders are treated this way, it is hardly surprising that the DOE’s prevailing culture is one of keeping your head down, not making waves, pretending not to see obvious problems.

The DOE’s food services branch serves more than 100,000 meals a day at an annual cost to Hawaii’s taxpayers of $110 million. A private enterprise of this magnitude would call for proven leadership, yet the DOE treats this like a rank-and-file position paying only slightly more than the average teacher’s salary.

The system’s food service manager should be responsible for providing budgetary oversight and rigorous management of costs, but that is impossible because each school’s food service manager reports only to the principal, whose budget is totally unaffected by food service costs.
Is it any wonder that the per-student cost of food service at one school can be twice the per-student cost at an otherwise comparable school?


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