

# Hawaii Reporter

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### **Hawaii Legislature Tackles Controversial Public Education Issues**

*Appointed school board bill moves forward; state funded school transportation now optional; superintendent and other educational officers' salaries may rise by 150 percent*

By Laura Brown, 4/7/2010 11:19:19 AM

HONOLULU, HAWAII - Businesses and taxpayers will bear the cost of a \$10 billion state operating budget through increased taxes and fees, special funds raids, and limited government services, the Hawaii State House of Representatives decided yesterday during its third reading on several bills. Conversely, the state government jobs and the scope of government will be impacted minimally.

Several public education bills were passed at yesterday's crossover of bills from one house to the other.

Those who will feel the brunt of yesterday's legislative actions include: students who need transportation to school, parents with children in junior kindergarten and more than 2,800 children waiting for the Hawaii Legislature to lift the cap on charter schools.

A major move forward in the education reform debate was agreement on a bill that would replace the statewide elected Board of Education with a board appointed by the governor, although a companion bill would limit the selection of candidates who would have to be approved by the Legislature.

### **Constitutional Amendment Bill to Change State Elected School Board to Appointed Board**

Gov. Linda Lingle has publicly stated that she would release the emergency Hurricane Relief Funds to end "Furlough Fridays" – lost instructional days due to teacher furloughs – if the Legislature passed a bill allowing the governor to have direct authority over the Superintendent.

Rep. Joe Souki (D-Wailuku) opened debate with strong opposition to SB2570 SD1 HD2, which would replace the statewide elected school board with a governor-appointed board.

"If it goes to governor's office, you are going to have the same things you are hearing right now. Makes that person the most powerful. Hawaii already has the most powerful governor in the nation. It's going to make us that much weaker. You are going to continue to lose the power between the Legislature and the Executive," Souki said.

Rep. Lyla Berg (D-Hahaione) countered: "For 32 years, we assumed the board would pay attention to policy. But they have to focus on compliance with contracts. We have to pay attention to the well-being of children. I would ask all of my colleagues to go into their communities and ask who they voted for during the last Board of Education election."

Rep. Gene Ward (R-Hawaii Kai) countered, "It is not about power: It is about education. We cannot continue to go from decade to decade with no improvement."

Ward reminded members of the House that former Hawaii Governors George Ariyoshi, Ben Cayetano and John Waihee all support an appointed education board.

Representatives Mele Carroll (D-Lanai), Lynn Finnegan (R-Aiea), Angus McKelvey (D-Lahaina), Karl Rhodes (D-Palama) and Souki voted "no," with all others voting "yes."

### **Governor's Power to Select Appointed Board would be Diluted by Advisory Council**

On another education bill, Ward then proposed an amendment to SB2571 SD2 HD2, which would remove the Board of Education Selection Advisory Council.

Finnegan argued for the amendment saying that in order to have real education reform, the Legislature has to address the issue of accountability. "We can't continue to do baby steps. Those kids that go to school, every year goes fast and we are promising education reform and we are not doing what we need to get it. We have a bill for an appointed board, but now we have this grey area with who the governor can appoint with advise and consent of the Legislature."

But with Republicans outnumbered 6 to 42 (Rep. Hanohano was absent), Ward's amendment failed and the bill passed with Representatives Corrine Ching (R-Nuuanu), Lynn Finnegan, Kymberly Pine (R-Ewa Beach) and Cynthia Thielen (R-Kailua) voting no.

### **Senate Bill 2124 Permanently Raids the Hawaii Hurricane Relief Fund to Halt Teacher Furloughs**

In yet another education bill, Senate Bill 2124 SD2 HD, Ward offered an amendment that he says would change the statewide public school system and end "Furlough Fridays." Senate Bill 2124 SD2 HD1 would borrow an unspecified amount of money from the Hawaii Hurricane Relief Fund (HHRF) to boost the Department of Education's budget and end furlough Fridays.

Ward's amendment included the \$62 million currently offered by the governor and would have required the State to pay the money back.

"The amendment would fix furlough Fridays, keep the legislators' word to taxpayers, and ensure that the HHRF is around when the State needs it," said Ward.

With the GOP out voted, the amendment failed and the bill was passed by the majority without any funding specified.

### **House Eliminate School Transportation for Honolulu District and Field Trips for All Students**

SB 2452 SD2 HD2 replaces the State's obligation to provide school transportation with "only if funds are available" and adds "or subsidize the cost," except for schools in the Honolulu district. It also eliminates buses for educational field trips.

Souki asked, "What about the kids in Puna or Hana? How are they going to get to school?"

Rep. Bob Herkes (D-Puna, Kau) said, "I have students in my district who go 50 miles to school and if there is no transportation, they won't go to school."

Finnegan said that there are many other costs included in bus contracts, like books. She suggested a solution might be giving buses to schools so they can operate them at the local level.

### **Superintendent and Educational Officers May Receive Sharp Increase in Pay**

While teachers are enduring a 7.9 percent decrease in pay due to furloughs, the House passed SB2324 SD1 HD1 that would increase the cap on the Superintendent's pay from \$150,000 to up to 150 percent of the highest paid principal based on the salary schedule in the most recent collective bargaining contract.

There are 4 principals whose salaries are greater than the Superintendent's.

The bill would also increase the state librarian's salary to 150 percent of the highest paid librarian.

Finnegan said that salaries should be merit-based, which would provide motivation to improve the system.

She believes this bill is bad timing.

Pine opposed the bill, stating that it means that the Superintendent could make as high as \$244,000 – far more than the governor’s salary. “The problem with our education system today is it’s all about money. Everyone who works in education is a public servant.”

Rep. Roy Takumi, (D-Pearl City) said, “None of us are here for the money. Look at Mayor Bloomberg of New York: he works for \$1 per year. I think we would all do that.”

Rep. Karl Rhoads (D-Palama) asked, “Why would a party that puts so much into market-based solutions be opposed to this? Why not just let the market decide?”

### **Amendment to Lift Charter School Cap Defeated; Bill Allows for Charters to Use Vacant Schools or Share Use at Existing Facilities**

With the Board of Education moving forward on the closure of schools as a cost savings measure, coupled with the lack of funding for charter school facilities, SB2589 SD2 HD1 would require the Department of Education to make vacant schools or portions of those schools available for use by charter schools.

Ward introduced an amendment that would have lifted the cap on charter schools.

Takumi asked for evidence that charter schools were any better than regular public schools.

Finnegan said that Kamehameha Schools did a survey that students feel safer and feel that they have accomplished something in charter schools and Kamehameha gives millions to charters.

But the Charter School Review Panel put Laupahoehoe School’s application to convert to a charter school on suspension, because any new school that is approved will dilute funding for existing schools.

The amendment to lift charter school caps was defeated, but the bill to allow charters to use vacant schools passed.

### **Legislature Re-evaluates Junior Kindergarten Program**

Junior kindergarten began in the 2006-2007 school year. However, only about one-third of the schools have since adopted the program.

Then, in 2008, the Legislature passed Act 14, an early learning system called Keiki First Steps, to gradually integrate children into junior kindergarten.

SB2068 SD2 HD1 requires the DOE and the early learning council to formulate a plan to do this.

Arguments for the junior kindergarten program supported early childhood education, but in a quality, preschool setting. Some said that options should be available for those who can’t afford quality preschool.

Rep. Mark Takai, (D-Newtown) said that children who start kindergarten before age 5 outnumber those 5 and over, so when they transfer from public school to private school, they are sometimes held back a grade. He feels that they should look at the mainland and compare Hawaii’s start date.

“We should have done this in 1996 and 2004. Let’s change the start date relative to the age of the child to be 5 years old,” he said.

All of these bills now move to conference committee.

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