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Hawaii teachers endorse union plan to end furloughs

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In one last pitch, the state House Finance Committee last night agreed to provide money from the state's Hurricane Relief fund to end teacher furloughs but only if Gov. Linda Lingle, the teachers union and the state school board reach an agreement by April 12.

State Rep. Marcus Oshiro, D-39th, the committee's chairman, said he would not commit a specific dollar amount to finance the deal because he believes the Legislature should not interfere with the collective bargaining process.

Thousands of Hawai'i public school teachers voted yesterday to endorse a \$92 million plan by their union and the state Board of Education to end teacher furloughs.

Officials said the plan was affirmed by 84 percent of Hawaii State Teachers Association members voting at 27 schools across the state.

The teachers union and the school board asked lawmakers to back the deal with money from the

Hurricane Relief fund to put pressure on Lingle to go along.

But Oshiro said he will not commit the money for furloughs without an agreement from all parties because it could otherwise be used for other needs given the state's \$1.2 billion budget deficit.

"I'm not going to commit the money when we have all these other needs," Oshiro said.

The union's vote was largely symbolic, because Lingle has said she will not release the money even if lawmakers had approved the teacher/union plan.

Lingle has said the HSTA-BOE plan is too expensive because all school staff would be brought back on furlough days, while she is proposing that only essential personnel should return.

The HSTA did not disclose how many teachers voted yesterday, but turnout appeared to be much lower than the 10,000-plus who voted in September to ratify the two-year HSTA contract.

Oshiro essentially gave Lingle, the union and the school board one final chance to resolve the issue and end the four furlough days remaining this school year and the 17 furloughs next school year.

If there is an agreement, House and Senate negotiators could move swiftly to tap the Hurricane Relief fund to finance the deal before

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the next furlough day on April 23.

State Rep. Gene Ward, R-17th (Kalama, Queen's Gate, Hawai'i Kai), said he would have preferred that the committee provide a specific dollar amount as an incentive.

"I'm not sure if your blank is going to show that we've got any skin in the game. You're just putting a zero," he said.

But state Rep. Isaac Choy, D-24th (Mānoa), commended Oshiro's move "so our keiki can go back to school and we can get this blight behind us."

"This is a national disgrace," he said.

Katherine Nakamura, a teacher at Noelani Elementary School in Mānoa, questioned whether yesterday's vote would be enough to influence the governor to fund the agreement.

"Sometimes I don't know if she really knows what she's getting herself into if we were to come back to school without all the other workers that we as school employees think are essential — the health aides, the office staff," Nakamura said.

"Hopefully this will send a very clear message to the governor and to the Legislature that the teachers are willing to compromise in this situation," HSTA President Wil Okabe said. "If the governor does not want the children back in the classroom, so be it."

Okabe pointed out that the HSTA-BOE tentative agreement addresses the governor's call for teachers to use noninstructional planning days to replace some furlough days. Their agreement would convert six planning days to instructional days.

Board of Education Chairman Garrett Toguchi said in a statement: "Tonight, teachers once again demonstrated leadership, showing they are willing to make further sacrifices and give up

more of their own time to support students.

"I hope the Legislature and the governor will take their overwhelming endorsement of the agreement seriously, and provide the funds to put an end to furloughs. This is about only one thing: educating Hawai'i's children."

two-part deal

The agreement is in two parts. For the current school year, about \$24.5 million would be used to eliminate the four remaining furlough days. For the 2010-11 school year, the agreement would use \$67.5 million to eliminate 11 furlough days.

Okabe said the agreement was structured to give lawmakers and the governor flexibility to fund one part and not the other if cost is an issue. The state is facing a \$1.2 billion budget deficit through June 2011.

Bonnie Fujii, an English teacher at Kalā kua Middle School in Kalihi, said teachers want to be back in the classroom with their students.

"At this point in the school year, maybe it's a little bit late to correct the problem. It's the fourth quarter, we're winding down. It's probably best to finish off with the furloughs and start

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fresh next year," Fujii said. "If we could eliminate furloughs next year, we would love that to help our students do better."

Bebi Davis, a science teacher at Farrington High School and the 2009 State Teacher of the Year, said she voted for the deal because she wants her students back in the classroom. Davis said she supports having all school staff back in school, not just some.

"Take, for example, Farrington. If the teachers are alone here with 2,600 students, if a fight breaks out, then what? What if a kid gets sick? What is essential?" Davis said. "But my thing is, I know money is a problem in our state, but education should be a priority. It's their future."

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