

Local News

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Hawaii teachers originally chose furloughs to avert pay cuts

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What started last September as a breakthrough by Gov. Linda Lingle and educators to reduce labor costs and help with the state's budget deficit ended yesterday with a face-saving compromise to cancel teacher furloughs and return students to the classroom for a full calendar next school year.

Teacher furloughs were the stigma of Hawai'i's budget crisis and gave the state the distinction of having the fewest classroom instruction days in the nation.

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan told Hawai'i that there had to be a better way. Educators warned that students would suffer. Angry parents were arrested at protests at the state Capitol.

But mostly lost in eight months of finger-pointing and backtracking was that teacher furloughs were a choice.

Lingle wanted to contain labor costs. The Hawai'i State Teachers Association preferred furloughs to straight pay cuts or layoffs. The state Board of Education and the state Department of Education sought to avoid larger cuts to education programs.

The two-year contract — with 17 furlough days this school year and 17 furlough days next school year for most teachers — was overwhelmingly ratified in September by rank-and-file teachers.

Lingle said yesterday that she wanted to look forward, not backward, but the lessons from furlough Fridays will likely influence labor negotiations and education policy in the future.

The experience showed the difficulty in quickly undoing a collective bargaining agreement even when all sides profess to want a solution. It also showed that it can take a crisis to prompt change. At the urging of parents, the state Legislature passed a bill to require a minimum amount of classroom instruction that would increase over time.

"My feeling is that this could have happened earlier," said Lois Yamauchi, a parent of students at Mānoa Elementary School and the Education Laboratory charter school who is involved with the group Save Our Schools Hawai'i.

"But I think maybe what it needed was public pressure. So I feel that all the energy and time that was spent by parents and community members sitting in and protesting and going to talk individually with policy makers, that was worth the time because it made people realize that public education is important and people do care."

Yamauchi, an education professor at the University of Hawai'i-Mānoa, said it was clear to many parents and educators that the state should have used other options to reduce the deficit.

"All the parties decided that this was the way to go, and I think, from the beginning, the parents saw that it wasn't," she said. "Personally, I don't feel there was enough time to respond."

"So one of the things as we move forward as community members, is we're going to try to get involved earlier. It's really hard to work against a contract that's already been ratified."

Many educators believe it is the quality of classroom instruction, not the amount, that makes a difference in student achievement. But many teachers said it should have been obvious that scheduling all furloughs on classroom instruction days was a mistake.

"I wish it was done earlier but I'm happy this has ended and the students can go back to school," said Bebi Davis, a physics and chemistry teacher at Farrington High School and a former state teacher of the year.

Davis said she had to put off several projects that would have given students some real-life examples of what they were learning from lectures and textbooks. "To validate that, I had a student in my class whose sister had me two years ago, and the sister said, 'You folks did way less than we did,' " she said.

Lingle agreed yesterday to use \$57.2 million of the \$67 million that lawmakers made available from the state's hurricane relief fund to cancel 11 furlough days next school year. Teachers agreed to convert six planning days to instructional days to make up the difference.

Lingle and educators disagree on how much school staff is necessary to restore classroom instruction, but rather than resolve their differences, they accepted an offer from First Hawaiian Bank, Bank of Hawaii and other local banks for a \$10 million credit line to help close any shortfall next school year.

The next governor could also agree to release the remaining \$10 million available from the hurricane relief fund.

Lingle, at a news conference at the Capitol, said she was proud that the state could end furloughs without raising additional taxes, laying off teachers, making class sizes larger or "blowing a hole in our budget."

"So it took us a while but I think we did it in a good fashion," she said.

Lingle said the agreement would not have been possible without the credit offer from local banks, which enabled her and educators to stick to their positions.

"We both still believed our position was a correct one," she said. "I believed 57.2 (million dollars) was needed, they believed 67 (million dollars) was needed, so it was bridging that gap."

Garrett Toguchi, the chairman of the state Board of Education, said the lesson is that educators should never give up and always keep the best interests of the students in mind.

"There's no win-win scenarios," he said. "In hindsight, we don't know if pay cuts would have been the better alternative, because anything in this economy would have been bad, right?"

"If we did layoffs, there would have been significant increases in class size. I don't even know if our classrooms could handle the type of class-size increases we would see."

Toguchi said other states resorted to significant teacher layoffs to close budget deficits. He said "what we did was not wrong. It was the best option we had at the time."

State Sen. Norman Sakamoto, D-15th (Waimalu, Airport, Salt Lake), the chairman of the Senate Education and Housing Committee, said the negotiations may have been different if there were better relationships between the governor, educators and lawmakers.

"I think there's frustration," he said. "There needed to be more building of relationships."

State Rep. Gene Ward, R-17th (Kalama Valley, Queen's Gate, Hawai'i Kai), said there should have been a resolution sooner.

Lingle second-guessed her decision to sign off on furloughs in late October. In November, she urged lawmakers to tap the state's rainy day fund and for

teachers to give up some planning days to get students back to class. But the governor, the teachers union, the school board and the department could not reach agreement on the details, so lawmakers were unable to act.

State House and Senate leaders were open to using either the rainy day fund or the hurricane relief fund to reduce furloughs but were reluctant to intervene in collective bargaining.

With no agreement and the session ending, lawmakers decided in April to set aside money in the hurricane relief fund for furloughs in the hopes that the governor and educators would reach a deal. Lawmakers tapped the rainy day fund to help social-service programs.

"I don't want to go back and point fingers, but we gave a new meaning to TGIF," Ward said. "It was embarrassing.

"As a legislator, I'm embarrassed that we have dumbed down our kids by taking away 17 days."

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