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Government Operated Education: An Oxymoron?

BY RICHARD O. ROWLAND

Hawaii's popular view of its system of government education (k-12) has experienced a major shift in the past 20 years. Twenty years ago, the prevailing attitude was that there were some flaws in the DOE organization but none that could not be fixed by injecting more money into it. Today, it is conventional wisdom that the system is broken. It is failing great numbers of our children. And what is being done about it? Not much. But at least the "more money mantra" is dying a slow death. The Governor wants to accomplish some significant change. The legislature disagrees. They want to tinker with the system. Yes. Tinker. Leave it intact with an adjustment here and a tweak there. In effect they are making a generation or more of children tinkertoys. And it gets worse. Talented, dedicated teachers and administrators whose calling is the development of children are being drowned in a mindless, unaccountable, unresponsive bureaucratic system that feeds on itself from within and from the public through the legislature.

With this in mind, we asked Bob Williams, the best expert on government performance audits that we know, to have a look and advise us how much it would cost in time and money to get a comprehensive audit of the entire DOE system. Bob is a former Washington State Representative (five terms) and is an experienced former performance auditor for the US Government Accounting Office. He got back to us 24 hours later with the following report. Please read it carefully. We think you will be angry. We hope you will be angry.

Because all he says is that desired outcomes should be defined and measurements established. And, someone, somewhere should be held accountable – continuously.

He rejects the idea of a comprehensive audit, saying that ample identified evidence exists about what is wrong and nothing has been done about it. Nothing. The legislature has been sitting on its hands. The DOE has been pretending all is well. Our elected representatives have failed and now they want to tinker. Here is the report:



Bob Williams

Hawaii Education Needs Reform, Not More Dollars

BY BOB WILLIAMS

Crisis lows in student achievement have many members and observers of our public education system blaming “inadequate” funding. There’s nothing new in the rhetoric – and that’s the problem. We all know it costs money to provide students with a high-quality education. But how you spend that money is just as important as how much. It’s a simple fact that two billion dollars spent poorly on failing programs is not as valuable for students as one billion dollars spent well.

The question is: How do we ensure that dollars are spent well?

When staff of Hawaii’s Grassroot Institute asked me to take a look at the state’s education spending and recommend some guidelines for a performance audit, I gladly agreed. To my own surprise, I’ve concluded that full performance audits of Hawaii’s education spending won’t do any good right now.

What Hawaii’s Department of Education (DOE) needs is a commitment to solve the significant problems that have already been identified through numerous and less comprehensive audits. There is potential for major savings if improvements are made in support services, department staffing and organization, school dropout rates, etc.

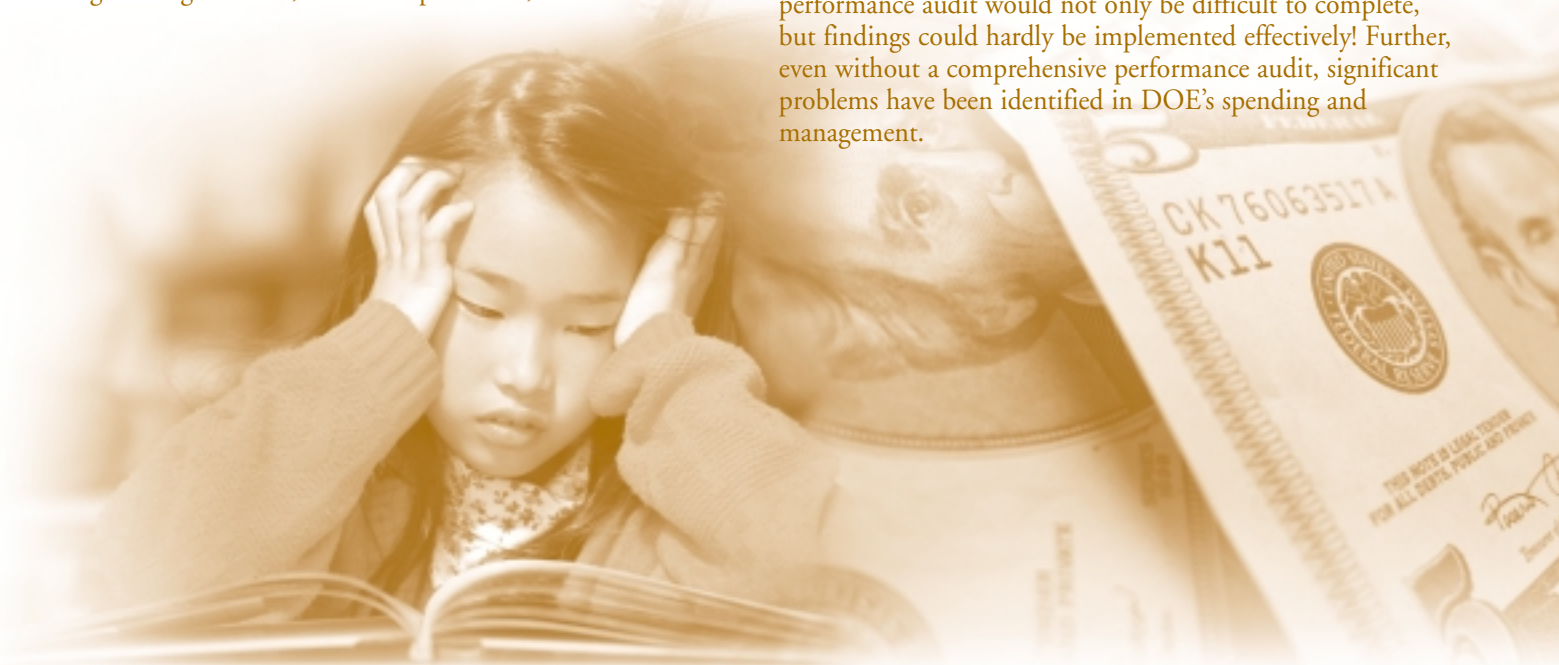
Consider:

Back in 1995, the state auditor found that DOE couldn’t reliably identify how education dollars were being spent. The lack of managerial oversight made it impossible for an audit to verify the accuracy of expenditure reports.

In 1997, the state auditor again found that data at the school level was unreliable for determining how much was spent on textbooks and other instructional materials. And in 1998, the state auditor discovered DOE was inaccurately classifying expenses.

A 2003 study concluded that the lack of clear accountability among agencies responsible for education spending results in “organizational confusion” and “lack of responsiveness to the needs of schools.”

With no clear management and accountability, a performance audit would not only be difficult to complete, but findings could hardly be implemented effectively! Further, even without a comprehensive performance audit, significant problems have been identified in DOE’s spending and management.



DOE hiring appears to be out of control.

The department reports a total of 23,790 permanent employees, and an additional 10,000 full-time or part-time "casual hires," for a total of 33,790 employees. Leaving out the "casual hires," the number of DOE employees rose 96 percent between 1974 and 2003, from 12,125 to 23,790. The number of teachers increased 19 percent; principals and vice principals 51 percent; certified support staff 100 percent; and non-certificated staff 237 percent.

Meanwhile, student enrollment has remained flat over the last thirty years.

All told, only 28 - 43 percent of DOE's employees work in the classroom, depending on which numbers you believe from the Department. Of the 33,790 casual and non-casual hires, 12,982 are licensed classroom teachers (though not all of them are in the classroom). DOE first estimated 9,600 teachers, but later revised that estimate to 11,222 (including 1,890 special education teachers), and said there are an additional 3,481 classroom assistants.

Of the \$10,422 Hawaii spends on each child in the K-12 system each year, less than half reaches the classroom for direct instruction and curriculum (teacher salaries, textbooks, supplies, etc.). A study conducted by Bruce S. Cooper and William G. Ouchi concluded it was only 42 percent. Adding a pro-rata share of fringe benefits raised total classroom spending to 49.3 percent.

The state's education goals, as defined by the Hawaii Strategic Improvement Goals and Measures, are not tied to the education budget, and schools are not held accountable for results! There is no measurable relationship between education spending and education outcomes, and there are no defined targets and benchmarks to measure progress along the way.

The state reports that the "estimated cumulative dropout rates for grades 9 through 12 is between 13 percent and 18 percent, well above the Hawaii national goal of 10 percent or less. Four-year graduation rates for students entering 9th grade in Hawaii are just under 80 percent, again, well below the state goal of 90 percent or more."

These problems must be addressed and solved before Hawaii's students and taxpayers can be assured the state is giving them the best value for dollars spent.

The state needs to specifically identify the core functions of its K-12 system, and ensure that every dollar is being used as efficiently and effectively as possible to achieve desired results. The DOE needs to have clear and accurate information on its own employment, and needs to evaluate the functions of each staff member. Dollars need to follow students to the classroom where learning takes place. And control over education needs to be put back into the hands of local parents, teachers and administrators, instead of letting one centralized state board of education make all decisions related to student learning.

Hawaii legislators should move beyond the rhetoric that says money is the only answer to the education crisis, and start implementing the solutions that work.

Bob Williams is president and senior budget analyst of the Washington state-based Evergreen Freedom Foundation. EFF is dedicated to individual liberty, free enterprise and accountable government.



Here is our Grassroot Institute call to action.

Repeat after us:

*“I am mad as hell
and I am not going to
take it any more.”*

Then call your legislator and ask:

- ◆ Why are you tinkering with children's lives?
- ◆ Do you think you know better than parents what their children need?
- ◆ What's wrong with parents deciding what's best for each child?

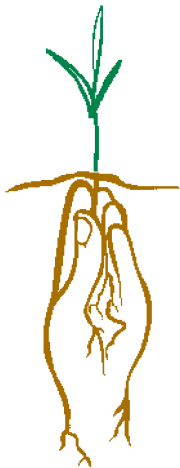
Our children, our talented teachers and our responsible parents are not TINKERTOYS for legislative fun and games.

The time for Action is NOW!



Richard O. Rowland is president of the Grassroot Institute of Hawaii, a non-partisan, non-profit public policy institute

focused on promoting the free-market, individual freedom and liberty. He is now in his third career; the first culminating in his retirement as a Colonel, U.S. Army; from the second he retired as a Financial Representative with Northwestern Mutual Network. He has a premonition that any further careers will not be in government service. He can be reached via email at: <mailto:grassroot@hawaii.rr.com> More information about the Grassroot Institute of Hawaii can be found at its Web site at <http://www.grassrootinstitute.org>



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