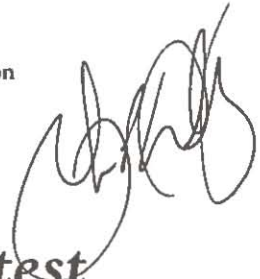


CHAPTER 32

PUBLIC SCHOOLS

JOHN P. DOLLY

Dean and Professor of Education
College of Education
University of Hawaii



*“Why are the test
scores of public school
children so low?”*

Hawaii faces the same challenges the rest of the nation does in trying to provide a quality education to a complex mix of students. Public education in general is a system problem more than a people problem.

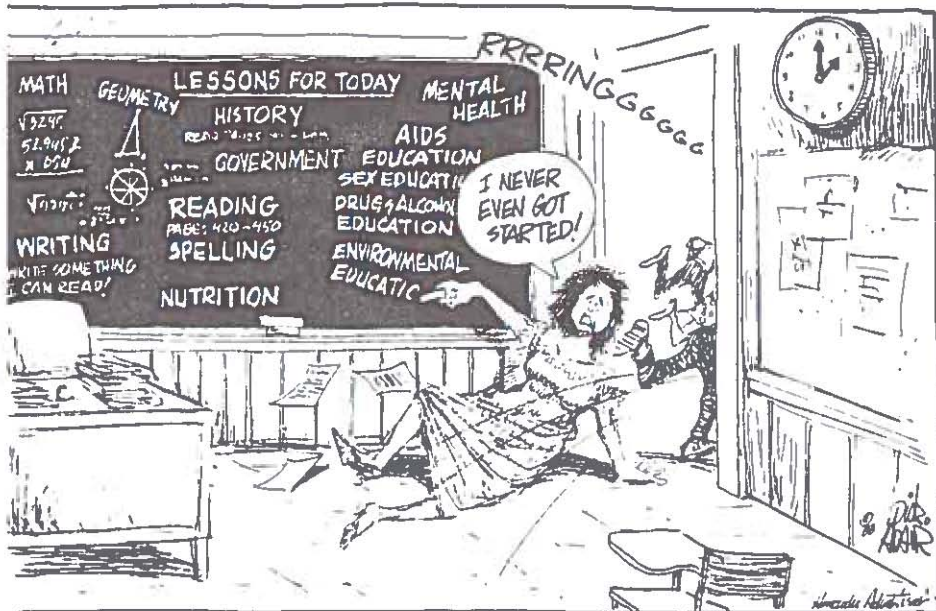
Hawaii's public school system was designed a hundred years ago for a population whose needs differed from those of today's students. Changing demographics are requiring schools to do more. They are expected to lift students to a higher level of competence, and to accomplish this while reducing the time students spend in school and the level of public support. In effect, we have a system that is doomed to failure.

Asking the wrong question. We worry too much about test scores. Clearly, the issue of who is being tested is important. An exceptionally high percentage of Hawaii's students attend private schools (between 17 and 18 percent compared to a national average of only 11 percent). Comparisons to national data can be misleading. Also, people need to

remember that standardized tests do not measure what a student is capable of actually doing in the real world. To find that out we need performance assessment. Schools engage in little performance assessment. Worrying about a student's standardized test score seems irrelevant, particularly for the large number who have no intention of ever going on to higher education.

To put it bluntly, we keep asking the wrong questions in education. We need to ask, "What can students do after they complete a certain level of education?" Schools should spell out explicitly what they prepare students to do, and what they guarantee their graduates will be able to do.

Most European systems require students to attend school for at least 220 days a year. In Hawaii, students attend for 180 days. Even on those 180 days, one would be hard pressed to guarantee that students were on-task the entire time. Making a comparison between a Hawaii student who goes to school 180 days with a 220-day European student is simply not fair. The comparison gets even more distorted when one compares Hawaii students with those from Japan.



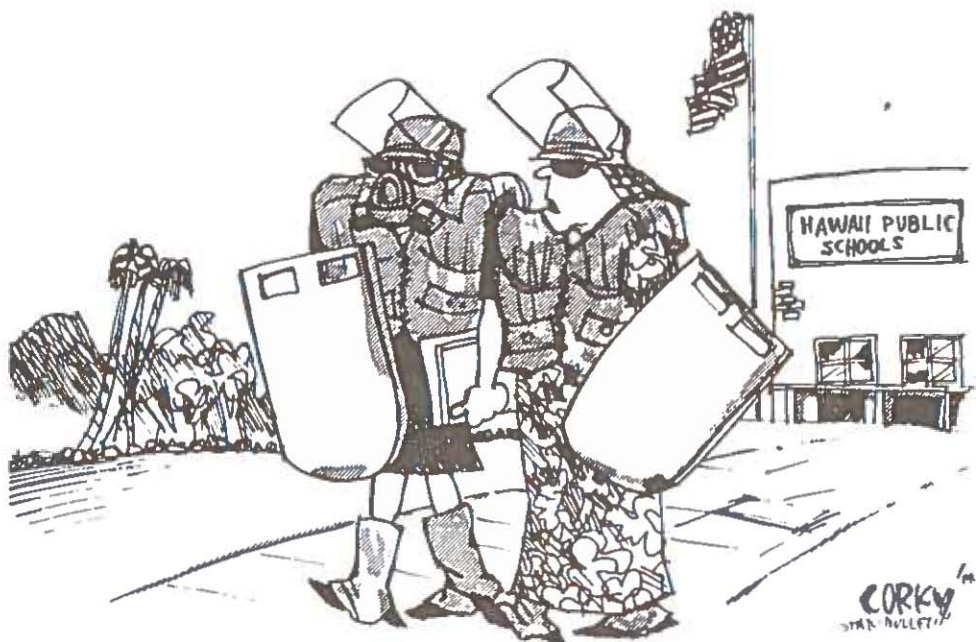
I had the opportunity to meet with teachers and principals in Japan in 1991. Based on those conversations, I calculated that when private after-school and weekend classes are considered, the typical Japanese middle-school student spends the equivalent of 300 Hawaiian school days in class. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that the student who spends 300 days a year in school is likely to learn more than one who spends 180 days there.

There are things we can do to improve public education in Hawaii. However, our safest bet is to start over. The changes that most people talk about are minor: extending the school day a little, more rigorous standards for teachers, getting parents more heavily involved, and developing school-based management. Nobody talks about holding anybody in the system accountable for performance, including the students.

Increase accountability. Here are several steps that should be taken to improve public education in Hawaii. The **Department of Education** must guarantee that students completing certain grade levels will be certified on the basis of performance rather than meaningless test scores and meaningless grades. **Teachers** must be held accountable for the quality of instruction they deliver and the performance of their students. **Principals** need to be held accountable to parents, teachers and students for their leadership and instructional support. **Students** need to be held accountable for their behavior and their performance in schools.

Students in some schools are so disruptive they are ruining the learning environment for other students. Schools must be free to remove them to give the majority a supportive environment free of distractions. The schools need an *enforced* code of student conduct.

Parents must be accountable and responsive to the schools; they simply cannot dump their children on the school steps and expect teachers to solve all their problems. The **School Board** must clearly state what schools are capable and willing to do and what they are not capable of doing. We are making schools centers for social services and that's fine, but the appropriate people must provide these services. We simply cannot expect teachers to do it all. If students need social-work support, then social workers need to be placed in schools; if they need medical assistance, then nurses or other medical personnel are called for.



"BUT I HAD NO IDEA WE WERE THE MOST VIOLENT IN THE NATION."

Good people work in our public schools, some of the finest teachers in the country. The problem is that Hawaii doesn't have enough of them. Hawaii has a teacher shortage that may further undermine the quality of education. Teacher shortages often lead to short-circuit programs for certification. They also lead to teachers' teaching outside their fields. When large numbers do that, the quality of education offered to students declines.

Keep government out. The government has no business intruding into the individual classroom—an unfortunately common practice in this state. I have witnessed the legislature debate what subjects should be offered in a high school, and whether certain programs should be mandated. No wonder we have problems in public education in Hawaii, when legislators are telling the schools what they should and shouldn't be doing. These policy decisions need to be made by the school board. If we want to improve the quality of education, get the legislature out of the classroom.

One problem I see as we try to improve Hawaii's education is the closed system we have developed. In order to become an administrator,

you must come up through Hawaii's system. This closes off the introduction of outside leadership, new ideas, and new initiatives, and tends to clone people. You follow the leader or you are not supported for an administrative position. Other U.S. school districts bring in principals, superintendents and other school leaders from the outside. They have new ideas and new perspectives, and will look at things differently. Hawaii seems to fear the unknown. We also think we know what's best for us and that we don't need ideas from the Mainland. This closed-mindedness does nothing to encourage innovation or creativity in our schools.

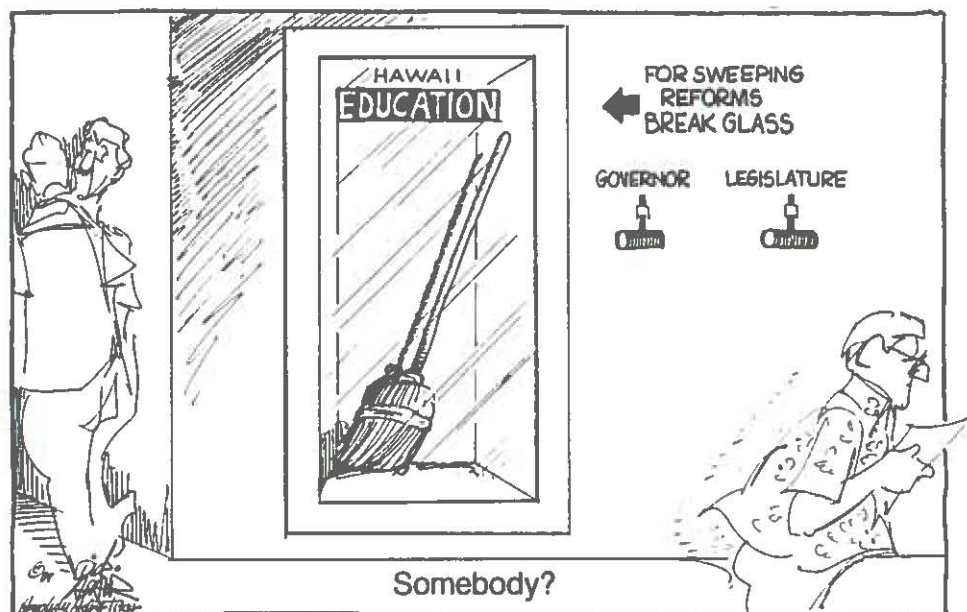
Make schools compete. We must remember that the public schools in Hawaii, like those in the rest of the country, are monopolies, not likely to change quickly. It's time to make schools compete. Let's open the system to allow greater flexibility at the school level and greater decision making for parents. The success of several centers of excellence in our high schools illustrates that schools have the potential to be creative and supportive of students. The movement toward school-based management will allow more of this.

We need a simplified system for applying for and granting district exceptions. If some public schools go out of business, so be it. Some may need to go. People are paying taxes; they should be able to choose the school they want their son or daughter to attend.

Certain neighborhoods have substandard schools. It's true and it helps no one to pretend that it isn't. We ought to give those people an opportunity to let their sons and daughters go elsewhere. Without competition and without accountability we are not going to see much change in public education in Hawaii or anywhere else.

A few other items can have a positive impact on education in Hawaii. One simple technique is not allowing schools to get too large. There is enough evidence now on the Mainland to conclude that large schools create more problems than they are worth. We should create schools within schools where students are known, have an identity, and where a clearly defined group of teachers is responsible for them. Creating a sense of community in the schools is a lot easier when you are dealing with smaller numbers.

Bizarre tradition. Another problem in Hawaii is our bizarre tradition of allowing principals to belong to a union. If principals are

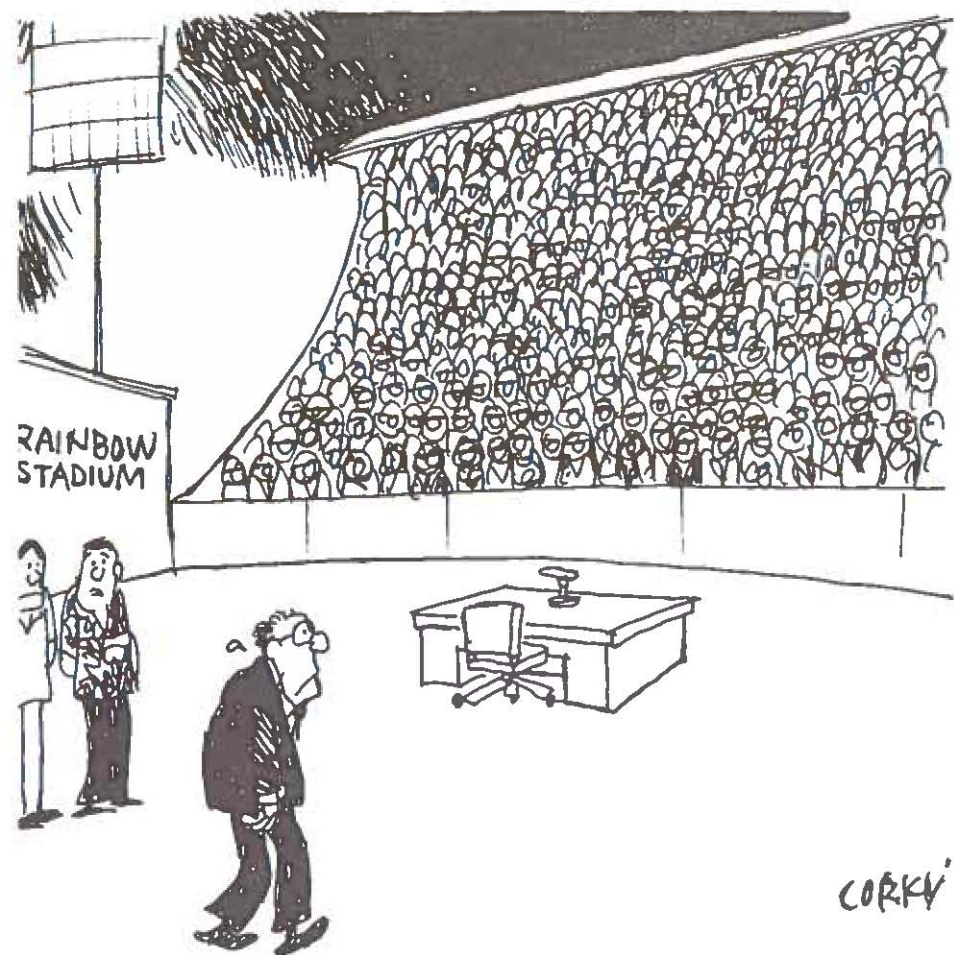


to lead, they need to be out of the union, exercising leadership. If they are so insecure that they need a tenure base to fall back on, we should look to the model at the University of Hawaii where administrators can retain their tenure as teachers. But *no one* should have tenure in an administrative position.

Equally frustrating is the fact that the State of Hawaii has a unified school system. When teachers get tenure, it's in the entire system. This allows them to migrate freely from school to school. If we want to create stability in rural schools and neighbor island districts, it is critical that we stop this practice. Grant teachers tenure, but only for their district or their geographic location. If they wish to move to Honolulu, they should have to apply for positions as they become available, and start the tenure and probationary process over in their new location.

Change won't be cheap. What is all this going to cost? Plenty. You need to increase the number of school days—that means raising principals' and teachers' compensation. It means additional costs for utilities and school maintenance, and money would have to be allocated to allow the schools time to restructure.

We also must create a greater commitment to public education. A sure sign the system is in trouble is the fact that professional people have by and large abandoned Hawaii's public schools. Even more distressing is the fact that large numbers of public school teachers and administrators send their own children to private schools. That's one hell of an indictment.



"THEN EVERYBODY WANTED A SAY IN THE SEARCH
FOR A NEW U.H. PRESIDENT..."