

CHAPTER 4

PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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“Are Hawai‘i’s public schools likely to improve?”

I initially declined an invitation to write this chapter, thinking some readers would be turned off by the thought of a private school president evaluating the job being done in the public schools. But two things caused me to change my mind: I have been a public school superintendent and know what public schools can be, and it has become increasingly clear that people inside Hawai‘i’s public school system are reluctant to “tell it like it is” because they have to work daily with elements that are part of the problem. I have the luxury of not having to worry about upsetting the legislature, teachers union, school board, or whatever.

Running a well-funded private school is relatively easy. The people who run Hawai‘i’s public schools face an almost impossible task because of social realities beyond their control: about one-third of Hawai‘i’s preschool children are already headed for failure because of poverty, sickness, and other handicapping conditions, coupled with a lack of adult protection and nurturance. Private schools can dismiss students whose behavior disrupts the learning environment; public schools don’t have that option. They have to do the best they can with everyone who shows up at their doorstep. There are, however, several areas in which improvement is necessary and could be achieved.

Political leadership. George Orwell would undoubtedly have had some incisive comments concerning the “double-speak” we receive

from our elected officials about education. Governor Waihee, for example, has stated repeatedly that he wants public education in Hawai'i "second to none." But the only area I can find where Hawai'i leads the nation is in the 47 percent of the kindergarten children who are not ready to attend school when they arrive. It seems money is always tight when it comes time to actually provide more funds to the schools rather than just talk about providing them.

Modern parenting. A major part of the problem is the way the American parent brings up the American child. I offer this not as an excuse but as a simple observation. I agree with the following comments of psychologist John Rosemond, which appeared in the *Honolulu Advertiser*.

In order to be educable a child must pay attention in class, accept personal responsibility for assignments given him by his teachers, and be determined to hang in there when the academic going gets rough. Almost without exception, teachers tell me that today's typical child does not pay attention, makes every attempt to avoid responsibility, and gives up at the first twinge of frustration.

The connection between this and what is happening, or not happening, in the American family is as clear as the grass is green. This generation of American parents acts as if it's more their responsibility to pay attention to their children than it is their children's responsibility to pay attention to them. This generation of American parents believes it is their utmost duty to shield their children from frustration and failure, and rescue them if need be.

A related problem is the pervasive influence of television on young people. I believe this to be far worse than most people recognize, both in terms of the values children acquire during the incredible number of hours they watch, and in terms of what they are *not* doing—like reading and using their imaginations—while they sit as passive observers.

Average viewing for elementary students is about 25 hours a week, and for high schoolers, 28 hours a week. This is approximately six times the hours spent doing homework. "Sesame Street and the Death of

Reading," a chapter in Jane Healy's *Endangered Minds*, should be read by every parent. The implications are frightening.



"NOW I'M WORRIED - I UNPLUGGED THE
THING AN HOUR AGO..."

Teachers aren't appreciated. What really matters in our schools are people: how well teachers teach and how well children learn. One problem is that the best students in our schools are not interested in going into teaching. This is not too surprising, since the incentives aren't there and since they read (when they do read) about the problems facing our schools, and about the blame attributed to the teachers for the problems of young people. Who needs that?

No revolution will ever occur in the schools unless it is focused primarily on what teachers do in the classroom with their students.

Adding to my concerns about schooling in Hawai'i is a statement made in 1992 by the president of the Hawai'i State Teacher's Association (HSTA) that 80 percent of the math teachers in Hawai'i are not certified to teach math.

Unsatisfactory governance. Clearly, governance of education in Hawai'i is not satisfactory at present. The Department of Education (DOE) is too centralized, with many layers of bureaucracy that slow normal activities and stifle innovation, and the governor, legislature, and State Board of Education are all involved in the decision-making process. Too many decisions are decreed by administrators at the top rather than by teachers and principals in the field. No institution can prosper with a system like that. The question of who is in charge here is a real one.

The task force on educational governance provided a litany of horror stories about our public schools. A teacher at Hau'ula Elementary School told of using her own money to buy school supplies needed by her students. Another teacher described a special education class on the Big Island being taught in a converted boys restroom, and a Farrington High School teacher reported serious problems in the storing and disposing of hazardous chemicals at the schools.

Unions erect barriers. My own belief is that the rise of unions in public education is a major problem. What I would label the "tyranny of collective bargaining" makes it difficult, if not impossible, for any school reform effort to succeed.

In 1961 the teachers of New York voted to unionize, in 1962 they won their first major collective bargaining agreement after a one-day strike, and in 1963 College Board scores in that state began to decline. This may be a mere coincidence, but I am convinced that the trade union mind-set that has dominated the teaching profession over the past twenty-five years is a major part of what has gone wrong in education.

Along those same lines, I can't reconcile the concept of tenure with the concept of professionalism. Teachers can't have it both ways, and Hawai'i provides an unfortunate example of why this is so. To my knowledge, very few teachers, no matter how incompetent, have been released in recent years. Most teachers in Hawai'i are competent and dedicated, but there obviously are some who should not be in the

classroom. There seems, however, to be no effective mechanism to remove them.

Union members sometimes put their personal finances ahead of the welfare of their students. For example, in a recent teachers' job action in Montgomery County, Maryland, NEA-affiliated teachers refused to write letters of recommendation for college-bound seniors unless those same students wrote letters to legislators encouraging them to increase teachers' salaries. In Hawai'i, despite an acute shortage of teachers for special education, the HSTA has opposed higher pay for these people, retreating to their litany of higher pay for all teachers.

School community-based management (SCBM). Much is written about SCBM in Hawai'i. But, as long as our principals are unionized, and the union must approve actions involving the principals, little change should be expected. A few schools are making progress on SCBM, but they are the exception.



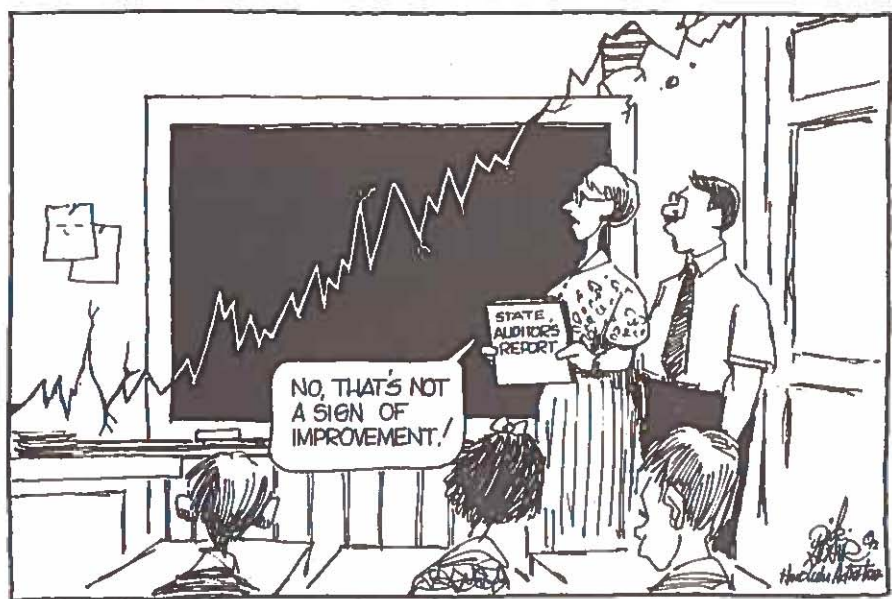
Nonprofit schools spend far less for results than governments spend for failures. The cost per pupil in the New York archdioceses' parochial schools—70 percent of whose students stay in school, stay off the streets, and graduate with high literacy and saleable skills—is about half that in New York City's failing public schools.

Recent research has isolated several characteristics of private schools which may make them more effective than public schools. Some of these traits could well be emulated by public schools: an emphasis on values; high expectations for students; an orderly learning environment; clear sense of institutional direction; vigorous team spirit; and adroit instructional leadership. Such characteristics are possible only when responsibility and authority are in place at the local school level. Lump-sum budgeting on a per pupil basis to each of our schools, with decisions about how to allocate these funds made by the people in each school, would ease the way to this kind of growth.

Another suggestion is to modify the method of selecting members of the school board so that a majority of them are appointed by the governor, with some elected by the people. This might increase accountability and could be a step in the right direction.

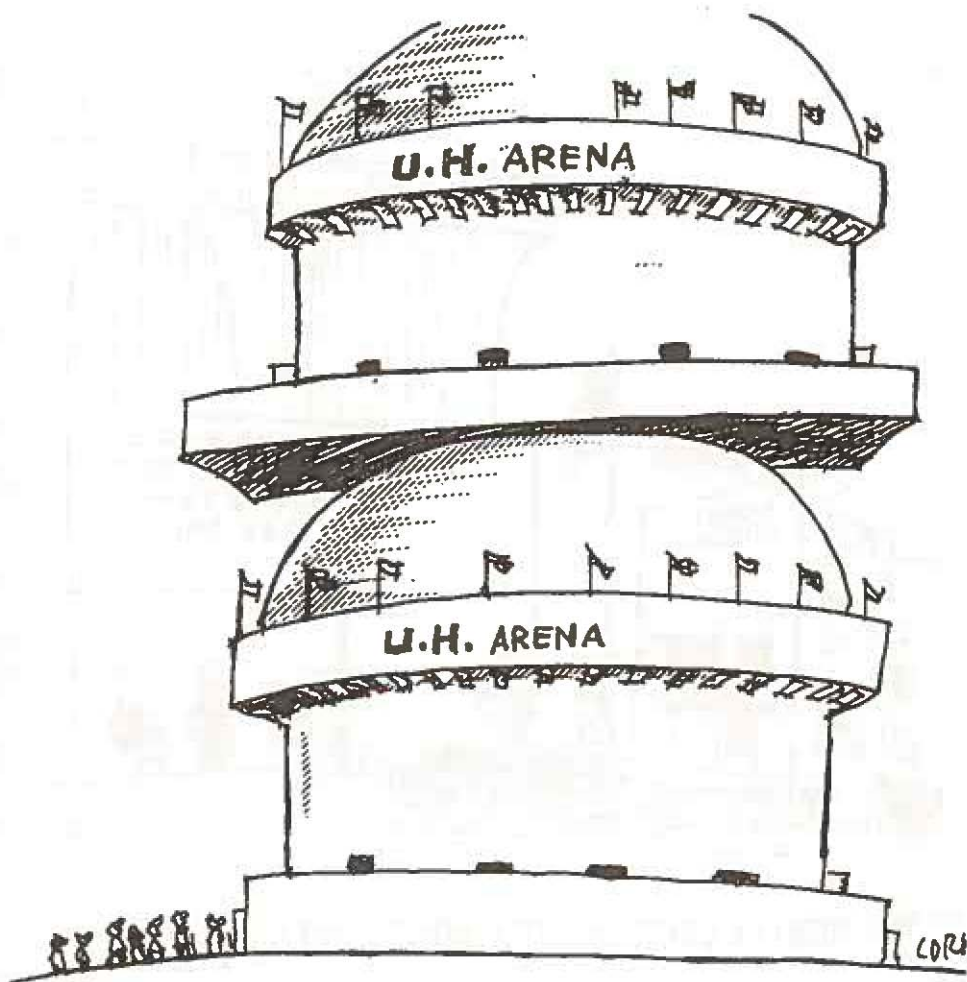
Clearly, school repairs must be removed from the Department of Accounting and General Services and put closer to the schools; our present system is inefficient, ineffective, and indefensible.

Some way must be found to reduce the bureaucracy and influence of the DOE on a teacher's actions in the classroom. A way of bringing important decisions down to the level of the school must be found, and teachers must be involved in the process or it is doomed to fail.



There should be much more choice in the public sector; competition in that sector would be advantageous to all concerned. Within the public schools, parents should be free to choose where their children attend.

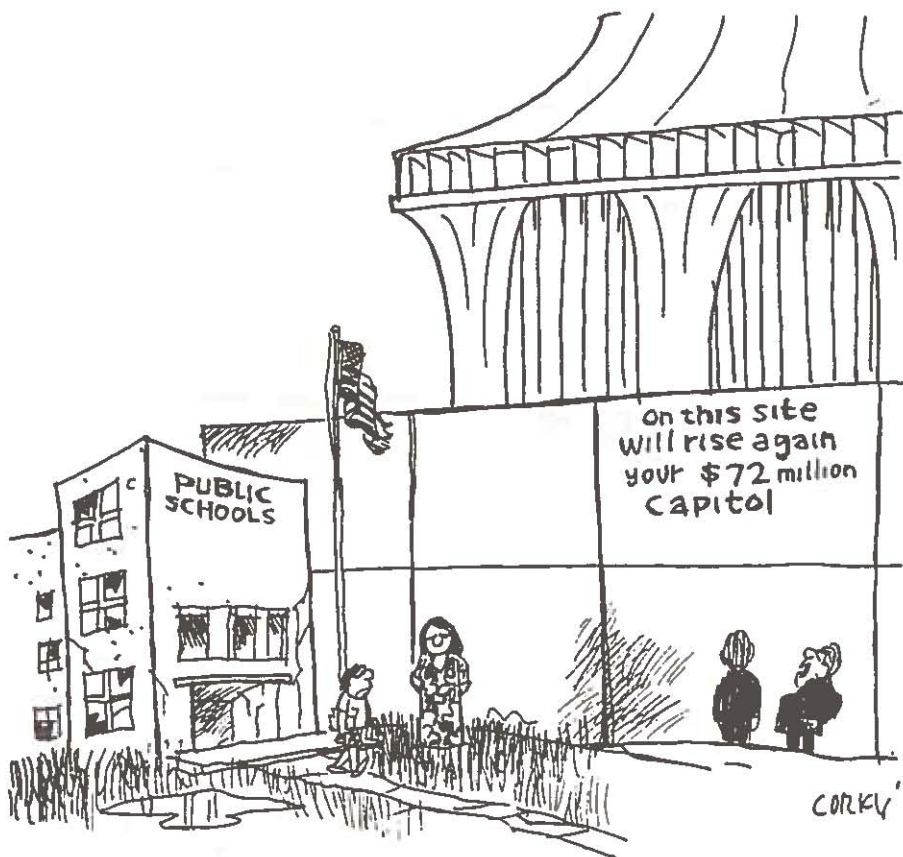
Misplaced priorities. In a state where teachers need to use their own money to buy school supplies, a bookkeeping error meant an extra \$32 million for a sports arena at the University of Hawai'i.



"WELL, IT SEEMS THE STATE BUDGET AND SUPPORTING BILLS HAD SOME TYPOS EVERYONE IGNORED..."

The renovation of the State Capitol should be further evidence to the public school teachers of Hawai'i that their importance to the state is not very impressive to those who control state finances.

Are our public schools likely to improve? I would like to be hopeful, but I don't see too many signs pointing in the right direction. Hawai'i's teachers and administrators face many obstacles, and our political leadership doesn't appear to be giving them much help.



"WEREALLY DON'T WANT A RUN-DOWN SYMBOL."
— A senator



"IT'S THE KID'S SAT SCORES; HERE, I CAN'T
MAKE HEADS OR TAILS OF IT..."

FIRST OF ALL, CONGRATULATIONS! I MUST SAY JUST BECAUSE WE WERE PARTNERS AND I PLAY GOLF WITH YOUR UNCLE WHO'S YOUR BROKER DID NOT INFLUENCE MY JUDGEMENT IN AWARDING THE STATE NON-BID CONTRACT TO YOUR FIRM. I JUST THOUGHT YOU'RE THE BEST FOR THE JOB. I CAN APPRECIATE THAT FROM THE OUTSIDE THERE COULD BE CONFLICT OF INTEREST THERE BUT I'VE RESOLVED IN MY MIND THERE'S NONE. YOU ARE MOST PROFESSIONAL AND WELL-WORTH THE THE JOB. AND WHAT YOUR WIFE GETS IN FEES FOR NEGOTIATING ALL THIS IS PRIVATE AND COMMON PRACTICE ...

THANKS,
DADDY,

