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Hawaii's school furloughs are over

Plan uses \$57M from hurricane fund, \$10M line of credit

By **Loren Moreno**
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Furlough Fridays at Hawai'i public schools are a thing of the past.

Gov. Linda Lingle yesterday declared an end to one of the most controversial and highly contentious chapters in the history of Hawai'i's public education system.

With \$57 million from the hurricane relief fund and a \$10 million, interest-free line of credit from local banks, Lingle said teachers and other school workers will be back on the job five days a week next school year.

The 17 furlough days this school year resulted in Hawai'i having the shortest instructional calendar in the nation and drew a scolding from U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan.

For more than eight months, the Hawaii State Teachers Association, the state Board of Education and Lingle bickered over numerous plans to eliminate furlough Fridays, which were agreed to last September and implemented a month later. Lingle and the education officials clung to their positions, especially on the issue of which school workers were essential to restore furlough days.

Protesters appeased

But the bitterness appeared set aside during the governor's press conference yesterday, when even parents who had protested against the g

overnor to the point of being arrested applauded as she declared an end to teacher furloughs.

"We can now refocus on education," said Ruth Silberstein, principal of Pālolo Elementary School. "If a good thing came out of this, the public is open to support the transformation of our schools."

Silberstein was part of a group of 20 parents and educators who met with Lingle last week about ending furlough days. Lingle said the discussions she had with those teachers, parents and principals influenced her to end furlough days before today's end of the current school year.

Lingle says she'll release \$57.2 million of the \$67 million from the hurricane relief fund that lawmakers had set aside to eliminate furlough days for next school year, which she believes should cover 11 of next year's 17 furlough days. Teachers have already agreed to give up six of their non-instructional planning days to cover the remaining days.

The plan also includes a \$10 million interest-free line of credit from local banks, because education officials insist that the full \$67 million is needed to put children back in the classroom for all of the next school year.

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Public charter schools will receive \$2.2 million in federal State Fiscal Stabilization Funds.

"I am happy that there is resolution," said Lois Yamauchi, a parent with the grassroots organization Save Our Schools Hawaii, which conducted a weeklong sit-in in the governor's office in April. Yamauchi also was part of the group that met with Lingle last week.

"I would have preferred for her to release the full \$67 million, but if this is what it takes for her to feel comfortable, that's fine with me. As long as the kids get back to school," said Yamauchi, whose sons attend Mānoa Elementary and the Education Laboratory School.

The \$10 million gap

The \$10 million difference represents the governor's insistence that only essential workers be brought back to school on furlough days, while education officials say all workers should be back on the job.

To bridge that gap between the sides, Don Horner, chairman and chief executive officer of First Hawaiian Bank, said his bank and Bank of Hawaii will offer the state Department of Education an interest-free \$10 million line of credit. Lingle credited Ted Liu, director of the state Department of Business, Economic Development and Tourism, with the creation of that public-private partnership.

"It would not have been possible without this good idea and the banks stepping up," Lingle said. "We have a difference in point of view. I believe that \$57.2 million, plus now the \$2.2 million specifically for charter schools, I think that's enough to cover all of the furlough days. If that turns out not to be true, the line of credit is there and available. This was a way to make both sides correct, or both sides able to stay with their position," Lingle said.

Education officials say that even though the \$10 million loan is available, it is unlikely they would

take advantage of it.

"We're going to have to find the funds any way we can without having to borrow," said Kathy Matayoshi, interim superintendent of schools. "We're going to look first at our own budget — look for the pennies under the couch — and try to see whether we can come up with the \$10 million."

Education officials will also rely heavily on the next governor to fund the full school year. Lingle's term in office ends this December.

"It's possible to ask for the additional \$10 million. It is still there," Matayoshi said. "We've been clear what our essential employee list is, and that is we will bring everyone back for the restored days. That's the commitment we made with the unions. It's part of our overall agreement."

Looking ahead

State Board of Education chairman Garrett Toguchi noted that BOE members began calling for use of the state's hurricane relief fund to end furlough days 11 months ago.

"The main thing, right now, is that we've been given the green light to end furloughs," Toguchi

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said. "In the end if we are going to be short \$10 million, we will work with the next governor to see how to balance it, whether it's taking the loan or taking the additional money from the hurricane fund."

The first furlough day next school year was scheduled for Aug. 27. Educators say they look forward to a school year with one less distraction.

Silberstein, the Pālolo principal, said teachers at her school sacrificed their time to keep kids on track despite the furlough days, including volunteering an extra hour a day after school to make up for lost instructional time.

"The kids suffered. In poverty areas like ours, the kids suffered because they were lacking meals that they relied on from school because their parents cannot afford," she said. "There was no structure for them on furlough Fridays when their parents were working hard. ... So we saw more inappropriate behaviors and their frustration."

Bebi Davis, a physics and chemistry teacher at Farrington High School, said she is ready to put the furlough issue behind her.

"Now I can give my students the full impact of physics," Davis said. "It's going to make a difference. They will have a lot more hands-on experience. I'll have more time to spend with them."

Davis said some of her current students expressed to her that furlough days made them feel less motivated or less interested in being at school.

"The positive with this is everyone in Hawai'i sees that we do need some form of reform in the schools. Not just money, not just quantity, but quality of education. It got a lot of people refocused," Davis said.

HSTA president Wil Okabe said he was pleased with the final resolution to furloughs.

"To ensure that their students could be back in the classroom with them for every instructional day, teachers have made significant sacrifices, including giving up six preparation and planning days — planning and preparation that will still need to be done on teachers' personal time," Okabe said in a written statement. "We hope this past year has refocused everyone on the need to give our students and their schools the priority they deserve."

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Gov. Linda Lingle, right, shakes hands with DBEDT Director Ted Liu, whom she credits with coming up with part of the furlough solution.

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From left, Marguerite Higa, April Bautista and Clair Hanusz — all cited for trespassing during a recent sit-in in the governor's office — were back in the governor's office for yesterday's announcement.

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The advertisement features a young girl with a tiara and a pink dress. The text is in a mix of black and pink colors. There are two buttons for voting on the dilemma. The logo for momslike.com is at the bottom.

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