



ISLAND COMMENTARY

Furlough opponents must consider all budget options

By Norman Sakamoto

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With Furlough Fridays a reality, efforts toward a long-term solution are overdue. The time that some are now devoting to finger-pointing and affixing blame are a distraction from the more important work we have before us. The real question is, as the economic torrent threatens to erode the foundation of public education, what can we do?

Two meaningful efforts are under way. First, community partners have stepped up to reduce the burdens on students, families, and employers by creating optional activities for furlough days. I commend all of those who have acted to minimize the damage to the school house foundation.

Second, many people are asking if more resources are available to help strengthen our educational system. Legislators are hard at work creating proposals that shore up the threatened foundations. These proposals are being presented to the parties to the collective bargaining agreements: the governor, the state Board of Education, the Department of Education, the Hawaii State Teachers Association, the Hawaii Government Employees Association and the United Public Workers.

We know what started this: State revenues are down, making budget cuts a necessity. The DOE and the governor and her administration negotiated a contract with the HSTA, under which the teachers will take a number of furlough days to reduce personnel costs. The teachers and the DOE negotiated to take the furloughs on instructional days.

The reality is that if we want to eliminate furlough days, we must bridge the gap by finding more money for education.

A number of funding options have been laid before us, including targeted tax increases, drawing from various existing funds, and reducing costs in other areas. Each proposal has supporters and detractors, but the most important action the parties can take at this point is to demonstrate a willingness to consider everything.

The discussion should be as inclusive as possible, which means, at minimum, that it would include the administration, the DOE and the HSTA in coming up with a solution. While all of us would like to have a swift answer, most recognize that a quick solution that runs into rancor and roadblocks would only lead to further delays.

Our state must make a basic policy decision about core principles: Are we prepared to make an unwavering commitment to education as a fundamental priority for our state government? Are we willing to fund teacher salaries and keep them on the job, even if that means leaving other programs with less money than they need?

I would say unequivocally yes. As a community, there is no greater commitment than the one we make to our children. That should include making the investment necessary to deliver the education that will serve them for the rest of their lives.

We must commit to addressing the challenge that lies before us. We have seen that the community can work together to help Hawaii's public school students. Businesses, community groups, government agencies and individuals have come together to provide child care options to parents and students facing the furlough days.

Our students, teachers, and community will gain nothing by re-hashing what brought us to this point. This is not the time for blame; it is the time for united action. It is not the time to score political points; it is the time for political will.

I am confident that there is an approach to funding that will address the varied concerns of our state government, the DOE, our teachers, parents and students. I am equally confident that with real leadership and a focus on what is best for our children, our community will find that solution.

State Sen. Norman Sakamoto is chairman of the Committee on Education and Housing.

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