



The Leadership Committee of the Senate: left to right, Senator George Ariyoshi, majority leader; Nelson K. Doi, majority floor leader; David K. Trask, Education Committee chairman; Sakae Takahashi, chairman of the Judiciary Committee and Kazubisa Abe, Senate President. (Photograph courtesy of Star Bulletin)

Politics and Education in Hawaii — A Transition?

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Recent months have seen an increasing number of books and articles written about "Politics and Education".¹ This does not mean that there was a lack of interest about the subject prior to this time, but rather that few organized or serious efforts had been made to collect and analyze pertinent information.

Growing interest about the relationship between politics and education have led to new evaluations of long accepted truism regarding the planning and operation of school systems, e.g. "Politics has no place in education." We are beginning to appreciate more fully some of the conflicts and paradoxes that exist and realize the distance between theory and practice.

Hawaii offers an excellent environment for a case study of politics and education. With education defined

essentially as a department of government, we have an immediate and continuous confrontation of "political" and "educational" philosophies. With the extreme centralization of power (based on an apparent unwillingness or fear of delegating authority) we are provided a sharpness of focus seldom found in other states.

Against this backdrop a dramatic step forward was taken by the Third State Legislature. The dynamic and progressive actions taken give evidence of a political and educational maturity toward education that has been long in coming. A climate has been created which places Hawaii on the threshold of exciting new possibilities in the field of education. Few times in our history have we been as close to major achievements as we are today. Rarely before have we shown such united concern or ef-

fort. There is today the possibility of more clearly defining the roles of various authorities responsible for the education program in the State. Such an accomplishment will do much to eliminate bottlenecks in decision making that have slowed the progress of much needed change. The degree to which new roles and responsibilities are accepted will determine not only the quality of education our children will receive in the decades ahead, but will also further define the nature of the public response to school programs and the relationship between educators and legislators. The public, educators, and legislators should all play a part in determining and implementing future educational programs.

A part of the "new legislative image" this year was a desire to look at the total spectrum of education.

This may be contrasted with past interests which have been far more specialized in nature, e.g. a program for gifted children. Here, again, we see where the absence of a definition of roles resulted in only "picking and pecking" at nagging problems and concerns. In other words the previous focus was on symptoms rather than upon basic ills. The inevitable result of such "tinkering" was an attempt to legislate a "good" program. In such cases special programs usually benefited and general education suffered. We know from painful experience that excellence in education will never result from just passing laws. The dedication, ability, understanding, and willingness of those who must implement these laws will determine the degree of excellence to be achieved.

During the past session, legislators showed great interest in probing deeply into educational needs so that intelligent appropriations could be made. This has not only made legislators far more conversant with the problems of education but has also reinforced the fact that Hawaii's future development is vitally dependent upon the quality of student graduating from our schools today. The result has been the development of a meaningful package of bills and resolutions relating to education based on a common philosophy and meshed so as to reinforce each other. This "package", discussed in detail in another article, provides an "educational Magna Charta" for Hawaii.

Further evidence of the "new legislative image" may be found in statements made about education in the major reports that were written. For example, a report from the Senate Ways and Means Committee asserted:²

Education is a central factor in shaping both the quality of individuals' lives and the nature and strength of societies and it

has long been recognized as such.

... the public elementary and secondary education system today should at the minimum be geared to (1) developing the intellectual abilities of each individual student to the fullest possible extent, (2) creating awareness of and a desire to develop those values that are uniquely human, and (3) preparing an individual for responsible citizenship. Public education must be successful in attaining these objectives if a viable, strong, democratic community is to exist in the future and if individuals are to have equal opportunity for full self realization.

The Senate Education Committee's Program draft stated:³

Equal educational opportunity means that every individual should have an equal chance to develop to the fullest possible extent his abilities through education. Today it may fairly be said that a strong skeleton exists for equal educational opportunity. The time has come to put some flesh upon that skeleton.

Finally, the Conference Committee's Report on Salaries declares:⁴

No state has shown the unified effort that we now evidence in Hawaii to bring about excellence in its public school system. This is readily apparent by the general interest, activity, and concern shown by the State Administration, legislators, board of education, advisory school councils, PTA groups, teacher organizations and general public. There is a common desire and willingness to substantially increase the investment in the education program. This fact is further supported by the large percentage of the state budget devoted to education and the willingness of the public to support such a program.

It is to be expected that the intent and purpose expressed in such reports will not be accepted by every-

one. A basic reason for this is a reluctance of some to have a clear definition of responsibilities and duties. It will be increasingly difficult, however, for the legislature, the school board, or the department of education to take refuge in a murky environment which avoids pinpointing responsibility. In fact, there is an ever increasing feeling that there should be specific responsibilities assigned to each agency, and individuals should stand or fall on their ability to produce. The emphasis is upon excellence and the necessary efforts to achieve this will be expected of all. The student and the program in the classroom are finally becoming the primary basis of action.

One of the key questions is: Do a majority of the present board members really want to be *responsible* board members? Do they have the time, the desire or the inclination to spend their time on policy matters instead of becoming personally and emotionally involved in the administration of the Department?

There is no question that the legislature has traditionally retained the authority in major educational decision making while at the same time has widely dispersed responsibility. This is an impossible situation since no one can perform his job well without necessary authority. Because of this relationship we have helped to create an adept set of "buck passers". Even minor problems find their way to the top men because no one feels confident enough to make a decision. For the few that occasionally do make decisions they often have not been supported or have been deliberately overruled. The end result is that valuable time and personnel are wasted and some decisions are never made. It is no secret that in the past the school board has religiously avoided decision making by "buck-

ing" hot issues to the attorney general.

Because there has never been a definition of the "proper" role of the school board and since only a few board members have been curious enough to want to find out what it might be, the basic issue has essentially been avoided. It seems, however, that the moment of truth has arrived for them. The legislature gives every indication of being willing to shift responsibility to an interested and capable board. If the school board is unwilling or unable to live up to the challenge, it is likely to be a long, long time before it is offered again.

It seems appropriate at this time to analyze more closely the emerging role of the legislature. What is a "proper" role? As mentioned above, legislators have been extremely hesitant in delegating responsibility and authority. There have been hard feelings and wide suspicions expressed about the School Board and the Department of Education in the past. Has this been justified? It has been repeatedly stated that the legislature will be willing to grant additional power to the board and the department when an acceptable level of confidence is achieved. Here, however, we become entangled in a vicious circle. How can respect and confidence be earned if the opportunities to make necessary and sometimes unpopular decisions are continually subjected to legislative interference or pressure?

A clarification of roles, however, seems to be in the offing. It is developing day by day as the legislature and the school board work hand in hand with the DOE staff to hammer out decisions about educational programs. The atmosphere is increasingly cordial and respectful and there has been basic agreement on many major issues. The board and the department were involved con-

tinuously this past session in legislative matters *as they developed* and not after decisions had already been made. In general, the board and the department were asked what they needed in order to adequately perform their jobs and then every possible effort was expended by the legislature to fulfill these requests. Time and time again the department was asked to "think big." Several times supplementary budgets were requested so that vital program areas might be accelerated. Never in the history of Hawaii has there been more board and department involvement in determining legislative direction. Never has the department been more richly rewarded with dollar support. The board of education and the department asked the legislature for support and backing as they moved into critical areas such as assignment and transfer of personnel, certification, coordination with the University of Hawaii, the probationary program and teacher evaluation. In each instance the department was backed.

In an effort to further delineate the role between the legislature and the DOE, Senator David Trask included the following in his educational program report:⁵

The DOE should be held accountable for insuring that individuals in the department responsible for making personnel decisions make their decisions on just, proper and objective ground and in accordance with fundamental principles Public officials should be discouraged from attempting to influence DOE personnel decisions.

To be sure, these are only words and there will be violations of intent and purpose—but, for the first time it being said ! ! ! and by members of the legislature. This is a big step forward and should serve as a forewarning to those who delight in making end runs around the DOE

to the legislature (or individual legislators) whenever they don't get their way. What I am suggesting is that a purposeful definition of what the school board is and should be is really evolving. Perhaps not as fast as some of us would like, or in the manner we would like—but at least it is developing. The crux of the matter now is, as mentioned before, whether the present board will accept the challenge. This is a most critical matter since the role of the *elected school board* will largely be determined by the present board's action and reaction to the increased responsibilities being placed upon it today.

On the basis of what we know about effective organization and operation, it is readily apparent that the legislature has not performed in a manner that brings forth the best educational programs. In fact there were lapses into "old behavior" during the past session but hopefully we are in a period of intelligent transition.

The definition of "the proper legislative role" will also depend on the willingness and desire of others to share new responsibilities. Certainly the legislature has been more deeply involved in operational policy than experience or good practice has shown to be desirable. Perhaps this is because there has been a reluctance in Hawaii to involve the public directly in the operation of the public schools. Perhaps it is because it has only been in the past few years that there has been a commitment to the expansion of public education. Hopefully, however, all of this seems to be changing. It would appear that the legislature is becoming aware that there are various jobs to be done and its role is more properly that of defining and designing a framework of education that will provide a foundation

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