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School board unhappy with situation on Niihau

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Members of the state Board of Education want the children of Niihau to get the best possible education, but they feel the Robinson family, the island's owners, are hampering their efforts.

The board's Hawaiian Education Affairs committee, which discussed Niihau School yesterday, said the Robinsons approved three teachers for the 35-student, kindergarten-through-12th-grade school. But since the family prefers that teachers be Niihau residents, one of those teachers is not certified. And the other two are certified for elementary education.

"We have to have the freedom to run

the school if we are going to provide educational services," board member Darrow Aiona said.

"We're shortchanging the kids there," board member Ronald Nakano said. "Why do we allow somebody in a private area to dictate to us who we should hire?"

William Waters felt that if the Robinsons won't give the board control over teachers or curriculum (Chuck Norwood said the school uses the Bible as its textbook), then the "family should provide all education opportunities and pay for it."

The committee said there are 14 acres of state land on Niihau, although it's not sure where, and feels that would be a more appropriate site for the school than the church land where it is currently located.

John Penebacker said the board's concerns over Niihau School are at least four years old. "When you going to stop bellyaching about it . . . and come up with some conclusions? . . . I really don't know if the people are dissatisfied with the education they are getting."

To find out, the committee discussed polling Niihau residents about whether the school should change and decided to ask a Robinson family representative to discuss the school's future with them.

"We need to be assured that the educational opportunities are equal to anywhere else," Aiona said. "If we have a school there, then we should have real, free access to this place."