

Charter schools make great strides in student achievement

POSTED: 01:30 a.m. HST, Jan 04, 2012

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By Ho'okako'o Corp. board

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As members of the local school board for three Public Conversion Charter Schools, we have had the privilege of seeing firsthand how the promise of the charter school movement can be fulfilled through visionary and courageous leadership and an engaged school and parent community.

Over the last decade, Ho'okako'o Corp. has celebrated Kualapu'u School's transformation from "underperforming" to making "Adequate Yearly Progress," which is a measure used under the federal No Child Left Behind initiative to determine if schools are successfully educating their students. We have watched the community at Waimea Middle School use innovative partnerships to raise student achievement, and we have cheered the faculty at Kamaile Academy as they plan the high school that will extend their highly personal learning environment from kindergarten through graduation.

In her recently released "Performance Audit of the Hawaii Public Charter School System," state auditor Marion Higa highlights the inconsistencies and inappropriate uses of public funds that impede the most important thing our keiki deserve: a quality public education. We fully support legislative changes to ensure that there is increased accountability for both local school boards and the Charter School Review Panel, and we appreciate that the auditor noted that Ho'okako'o stopped questionable spending practices at Kamaile Academy. We also recognize that this audit concentrated on only one aspect of the exciting journey to provide innovation and choice in education through well-run and managed charter schools.

Among the many successes we have seen:

» As the state auditor noted in her report, Kamaile Academy was the only charter school included in the audit that has negotiated a supplemental agreement with the Hawaii State Teachers Association to allow innovative models for teacher growth and evaluation. In fact, Kamaile is the first public school in Hawaii to offer an Expanded Learning Time model that fosters increased teacher collaboration time and attention to student performance data.

» Kualapu'u School's Expanded Learning Time model has gained nationwide recognition and the data in its implementation year already shows increased teacher and community satisfaction with the improvements to teaching and learning.

» Waimea Middle School has been lauded for innovative community partnerships, such as the Mala'ai Garden, which teaches the children important lessons beyond the core curriculum such as sustainability and Hawaiian culture.

As we said, this is a journey. In the past decade, all charter school local school boards have had to address the growing pains that are inevitable with significant change: inconsistencies in state law, challenges with collective bargaining and underfunding. Our board has had to balance the need to let strong and visionary leaders lead with the need to intervene and even remove leadership in order to make sure our students are well served. We have approached this journey with the understanding that no two schools are the same.

Our schools are in different communities, and face different challenges. It is precisely because there is room in our public school system for different educational models that our schools and students can thrive. What we have seen over the past decade makes us more certain than ever that the charter school movement is worth our continuing support, so that every student has the ability to reach his or her full potential.

This commentary was signed by the board of directors of the Ho'okako'o Corp.: Keith Vieira, chairman; Megan

McCorriston, executive director; Pauline Lo Bailey; Ann Botticelli; Mitch D'Olier; Guy Kaulukukui; Ray Soon; Robert Witt; and Don Young.

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