



February 1, 2009

Education in need of strong leaders

By Christine Sorensen and Donald B. Young

This commentary is part of a series of articles prepared by Voices of Educators, a non-profit coalition designed to foster debate and public policy change within Hawai'i's public education system, in partnership with The Advertiser. It appears in Focus on the first Sunday of the month.

We are all well aware of the bleak economic forecast facing us. As attention is focused on meeting the challenge, policymakers and educators should keep in mind two key ideas. First, we must have the courage to support education as a long-term solution to the current crisis. Second, we must be creative in looking for different ways to achieve our goals. We cannot continue to do business as usual since business is certainly not usual these days. Our current context creates opportunities, if we are willing to be bold, creative and courageous.

This is a time to reaffirm the importance of education for the future of our state. Now more than ever we must ensure adequate funding for education. Through strong leadership we must maintain and even enhance our investment in order to remain competitive nationally and globally. William Daggett, president of the International Center for Leadership in Education, insists that in an economy where "financial resources are shrinking, expectations for improved student performance are higher than ever. To keep up with today's economic challenges, schools must adapt. Managing the process takes leadership at all levels." We charge both policymakers and educators to step up to this leadership challenge.

Tony Wagner, author of "The Global Achievement Gap and Making the Grade," is an influential consultant to Hawai'i public and private education. His is a more radical view in which schools focus on students' mastery of the seven skills that matter most: critical thinking and problem solving; collaboration and leading by influence; agility and adaptability; initiative and entrepreneurship; effective oral and written communication; accessing and analyzing information; and curiosity and imagination. These skills correlate well with the four essential learning outcomes promoted by the Association of American Colleges and Universities and the state Department of Education's six General Learner Outcomes: self-directed learner; community contributor; complex thinker; quality producer; effective communicator; effective and ethical user of technology.

How do we focus on these goals and move strategically to reach them? It will take concerted efforts on the part of both policymakers and educators. Especially in financially difficult times we need policymakers to allow and encourage creativity and flexibility, remove roadblocks to action, encourage experimenting with new ideas, and avoid creating restrictions. Our policy leaders must focus on system efficiency and end the practice of unfunded mandates — programs that require the expenditure of resources, without providing those resources. Both policymakers and educators can encourage and provide incentives for new roles that businesses and communities can play in supporting education efforts, including public-private partnerships.

At the same time it must be understood that education providers will be held accountable for outcomes. As education leaders, we recognize that we must do things differently, not simply attempt to do more of the same with fewer resources. We understand that we must re-examine what we do and how we do it, eliminate programs and approaches that are no longer needed or not effective, and create new ways to access education resources at all levels.

We have invested much in education already. We are making progress. We must sustain those efforts for the long-term outcomes they will provide in workforce and economic development or face

losing our return on past investments. We must avoid prescriptions and restrictions. Policymakers must create policies that give power to those closest to the problem, asking them to develop effective solutions and holding them accountable for the results.

Looking to the long-term and doing what is right requires bold and strong leaders with political will and commitment. Now is the time to invest in the future, recognizing the critical place of education in solving our problems and safeguarding our children and their future. Now is the time for actions to speak louder than words, the time for courage and creativity

Additional Facts

COMING NEXT

Here is a list of upcoming topics for future Voices of Educators commentaries:

March 1: Exploring the skills students need most to prepare for a successful future both in college and in the workforce.

April 5: How does long-term investment in education make a difference on the economic trajectory of the state?

May 3: A look at partnerships to ensure that students are workforce and college ready.

June 7: Examining new, cost-effective models for achieving learning outcomes.
