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2 charter schools aim to bypass furlough Fridays

Molokai, Kihei campuses looking for different paths to deal with cutbacks

By CLAUDINE SAN NICOLAS, Staff Writer

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WAILUKU - After Hawaii's charter schools already absorbed a more than 30 percent cut in funding this year, Maui County's two public charter schools may not be implementing the furlough Fridays at their campuses beginning next month.

At Kualapuu Elementary School on Molokai, Principal Lydia Trinidad said she and her board are preparing a supplemental agreement that would allow her campus to stay open even when other schools within the state Department of Education are closed.

"It's very important that we continue to have our students in school. Learning takes place in the classroom, and that's what we want to continue to do," Trinidad said.

Meanwhile, Kihei Public Charter School Director Mark Christiano said his school calendar had already allotted one-day furloughs each month in response to ongoing reduced per-pupil funding for students in charter schools. Kihei Charter's teacher furloughs are scheduled during teacher preparation time and not student instruction periods as was agreed upon in the recent Hawaii State Teachers Association bargaining agreement, he said.

Hawaii's charter schools are funded by the state but operate with separate school boards and are not automatically bound by the same labor agreements as staff at other public schools.

Last Tuesday, Hawaii public school teachers ratified a two-year contract that included 17 unpaid days off for classroom teachers each year. Those days have become known as "furlough Fridays" and begin Oct. 23 when students will be told to stay home and go without classroom instruction.

HSTA President Wil Okabe sent a letter to teachers prior to the contract ratification last week saying furloughs for public school teachers do not apply to charter schools.

Trinidad said her school board plans to file a supplemental agreement that would keep her students operating under the calendar initially set at the beginning of the year.

Christiano said his school board will be reviewing the matter and making a decision on whether any further furlough days need to be implemented. Neither he nor his staff is making any recommendations one way or the other, he said.

Charter schools are currently operating with funding at \$5,500 per student, a nearly 33 percent reduction from \$8,149 in previous years.

Christiano said Kihei Charter's virtual academy, which provides online instruction and curriculum to about 130 students in kindergarten through 6th grade, is unaffected by the furlough dates.

"All our virtual pieces can be accessed from home," he said. The three full-time teachers who assist students with their online lessons can still be reached through the Internet and in person.

The traditional "brick and mortar" schools for Kihei Charter in grades 6 through 12 have 340 students enrolled this school year. The campuses are at 300 Ohukai Road, Suite 209; and at 41 E. Lipoa St., No. 29.

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