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More students add up to fewer dollars for public charter schools

VIEWPOINT by GENE ZARRO

POSTED: April 20, 2008

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Public charter schools cannot be the only state agency whose responsibility has increased and its budget has decreased. The per-pupil allocation for the students attending public charter schools is about to go down by 7 percent — a huge unjustified cut that cannot be permitted.

When we put in our budget request this year it showed an increase over last year, based on larger enrollments and the fact individual school budgets are based on a per-capita allocation. We just have more students.

Last year we received \$8,149 per student. Now we are looking at \$7,600 per student because our budget request was slashed.

I am sure it was cut because it was definitely more money than we received as a statewide agency last year. It is not that simple.

What caused the budget increase was our exploding statewide enrollment.

There are two new start-up charter schools opening this year and last year a Department of Education school was converted to a charter school.

Despite the challenges presented by our facilities and our per-capita allocations being lower than the DOE allocations, families in Hawaii continue to send their children to charter schools.

Should we not accommodate them?

Public charter schools now serve 4 percent of the total public school population in Hawaii. Charter school operators have succeeded by trying to meet the demands of the communities they serve.

We knew when we submitted our budget that this coming year was going to be a tight-budget year, yet at no time were we told not to enroll the additional students coming from other schools.

Every year charter schools have watched their enrollment grow and it appears that the DOE has watched their enrollment shrink.

Has their budget been cut to less than they received last year? Maybe they did not get everything they asked for but they are not getting less than last year.

We are seeking the same per-pupil funding as last year.

Some people may think we are already getting too much money. I do not think so.

In order to keep the Kihei Charter School doors open we pay \$34,000 per month for rent and \$12,000 per month for electricity. That is \$550,000 a year out of our education budget.

If we take a \$500 per student cut in our allocation we will have \$210,000 less than we had conservatively estimated we would need this coming school year. That is a lot of money to lose and more than one small school should have to endure.

You can see our cause for anxiety.

Charter schools are not asking for an increase in our per-capita funding, though I think we should have one in the form of facilities stipends.

What we would like is to be treated the same as other state agencies and not have to survive a deep cut.

Right now, the state's charter schools have an overall budget of \$56 million to serve a projected enrollment of 7,358 students.

That is where the \$7,610 per student allocation comes from — \$8,149 times the same projected amount of 7,358 equals \$59.96 million. The \$4 million needs to be put back in the budget for charter schools.

I am sure there is a solution, we just need to come together and find it.

n Gene Zarro chairs the Kihei Charter School's board of education. He lives in Kihei.

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