

## Charter school independence must come with accountability

By: Star Advertiser

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The charter schools movement has run into some particularly punishing headwinds in recent months — or, viewed from the more optimistic perspective, is facing an important crossroads in its development.

Beyond the persistent struggle for adequate funds, which continues to intensify in the wake of the recession, the state's 31 charter schools have come under a taint of suspicion because of an accountability record that can only be called spotty. The overseers of these schools are now being called to hold charter administrators' feet to the fire, lest the schools that are floundering undercut the educational accomplishments achieved at other charters.

There have been dispiriting developments, but stricter regulations and new appointees put in place as well, both of which could combine to refocus the system's resources on its successes.

Here's the down side: Problems with nepotism have surfaced, first at Myron B. Thompson Academy in Kakaako and more recently at Halau Lokahi Public Charter School in Kalihi.

Further, an independent audit of Halau Lokahi found internal financial controls lacking, payments to related parties, unrecorded liabilities and a sizeable debt. This isn't the sort of situation that should be tolerated in an era of funding shortages.

Concern over such irregularities compounds the discomfort with uneven academic achievement at some schools. And still, the state's Charter School Review Panel has yet to close a single charter in more than 10 years. The one time it voted to do so, revoking the charter of the Waters of Life school on the Big Island about two years ago, the revocation was overturned because rules enabling the vote were not in place.

But there are hopeful signs that a turnaround is possible. The review panel has done more frequent audits, bringing problems to light. And with the signing of Senate Bill 1174, the illumination of charter school operations may be brighter still.

The measure puts charter schools on a six-year calendar of review and reauthorization and requires local school boards to adopt an ethics policy.

Another component of the new law — a task force created to examine possible reforms to governance and authority — is due to begin meeting in the coming weeks.

Last, some new talent is being brought into the current oversight structure. Lynn Finnegan, the former lawmaker and a charter school parent, has joined the review panel. And the hiring of Roger McKeague as executive director of the Hawaii Charter School Administrative Office should bring a fresh perspective to bear on the problems going forward.

The charter school movement gives Hawaii's students the opportunity to try innovative educational choices, an opportunity that shouldn't be limited to those of private-schooling means. But that opportunity could be a false hope for many unless those running these experiments are held to account for the management of public funds and the education of the children with whom they've been entrusted.

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