



Hawaii DOE gets failing grade for fiscal transparency

BY MALIA ZIMMERMAN - HONOLULU — A new report by the Cato Institute gives Hawaii's Department of Education an F-minus for financial transparency.

Only Alaska ranks worse.

Other states receiving an F-minus for education were Massachusetts, Missouri, Connecticut, Oregon, Ohio, Oklahoma and Nevada.

"When the state education departments provide incomplete or misleading data, they deprive taxpayers of the ability to make informed decisions about public school funding. At a time when state and local budgets are severely strained, it is crucial that spending decisions reflect sound and informed judgment," said the Cato report, "Cracking the Books: How well do state education departments report public school spending."

Specifically, Cato notes the Hawaii DOE fails to provide any data on total salary expenditures or pensions.

Hawaii DOE has failed to post the most recent two years of per pupil expenditures or its capital expenditures and fails to provide a table or graph to compare changes in per pupil — or capital improvement — spending.

Hawaii has 183,251 students and 13,000 teachers in its 288 schools, which operate under a single statewide unified school district.

For the 2012-13 school year, the state spent \$1.762 billion on public education, including \$1.348 billion in state general funds, \$99 million in special/revolving funds, \$284.54 million in federal funds and \$32.91 million in trust funds. The state's construction budget is \$296.472 million. The DOE listed per-student spending for 2011-12 at \$11,583.

But Randall Roth, a University of Hawaii law professor who has worked on education reform issues, said the real number is about \$16,000.

Jamie Story Kohlmann, president of Texas Families First, an organization that aims to increase local control and family empowerment in Texas public schools, worked on education transparency in Hawaii between 2008 and 2011.

“Hawaii spends vastly more than most other states to fund its public schools yet gives its taxpayers very little information with which to gauge their investment,” Kohlmann said. Many of the improvements suggested by the report are quick and inexpensive to implement, Story said, such as posting the year-to-year comparisons.

“I hope Hawaii’s DOE will move quickly to implement some of these most basic changes, while making a long-term effort to systemically improve its financial transparency to parents and taxpayers,” Kohlmann said.

Donalyn Dela Cruz, a spokeswoman for the DOE, said the department in the past year has worked toward transparency and questioned whether the fact that Hawaii is the only state with a centralized single school district affected the study results.

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