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LETTERS; Hawaii's Education Gap

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To the Editor:

"Hawaii's Children, Left Behind" (editorial, Oct. 31) castigated the public school teachers in Hawaii for agreeing to statewide furloughs to help balance the state's budget and implied that furlough days were in some way a desired outcome that Hawaii's teachers actively sought.

The editorial did not mention the more draconian options Hawaii's teachers were forced to consider and the personal and professional toll that these furloughs are taking on the state's educators.

A total of 48 states experienced budget crises this year. In most, teachers partnered with parents and school administrators to urge lawmakers to strike a balanced approach to solving the shortfall so that students would be spared. Teachers also lobbied Congress and sent thousands of e-mail messages to pass the stimulus bill to secure federal dollars to save jobs in education and to maintain class sizes.

Unfortunately, Hawaii's political leaders played a shell game with the state's stimulus dollars. While stimulus dollars were saving 300,000 public school jobs around the country, Hawaii's politicians used the state's stimulus dollars to offset general revenue shortfalls. In fact, Hawaii has been specifically singled out by Secretary of Education Arne Duncan for using federal money intended to help public schools to close budgetary gaps while actually reducing state financing for education.

Teachers understand and share the frustration and concern that parents in Hawaii are experiencing over the loss of instructional time. Indeed, teachers are facing increased pressure to help students meet No Child Left Behind targets and other goals with less time in the classroom.

What's needed is action by Hawaii's elected officials. They can do what other legislators around the country have done to find the right mix of taxes and cuts to restore the schools to a full year of class days -- and give Hawaii's children the instructional time they need and deserve.

Dennis Van Roekel
President
National Education Association
Washington, Nov. 4, 2009

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Compared with the rest of the country, Hawaii does not tax enough, and with what little revenue it raises, it shortchanges public education.

The Census Bureau compared total taxes paid by families living in the largest cities in 30 selected states earning \$75,000 a year; Honolulu families paid 21 percent less than the average.

Compared with the 2005 national average of total state and local government expenditures for public education, Hawaii underinvested in public education by 18 percent.

To make matters worse, almost 10 percent of Hawaii's public school students are from migrant military families, most of whom do not remit income taxes to Hawaii. After deducting the nominal Department of Defense Impact Aid Funds, the uncompensated expenses to the Hawaii public school system remains in the hundreds of millions of dollars every year.

Operating such an inadequately financed public school system in one of the most expensive states in America -- it's no accident when Hawaii's children get left behind.

Kim Coco Iwamoto
Honolulu, Nov. 3, 2009

The writer is a member of the Hawaii State Board of Education.

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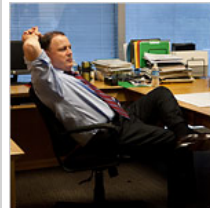
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