

Notes Regarding 11/30/15 Board of Education Listening Tour Meeting

A crowd of approximately 30 people attended the meeting in Hilo that was chaired by 2 members of the BOE (DeLima & Williams). They stated that the purpose of the meeting was to hear feedback from the charter school community regarding the performance of the State Charter School Commission (SCSC). The BOE appoints the charter school commissioners. They have very limited oversight of the Commission, its staff, and the Commission administrator (Tom Hutton). I did not take notes at the meeting, so these recollections may not be completely accurate regarding all of the details. The BOE members stated that the law only allows them to get involved in oversight issues if there is significant public criticism (or something to that effect) of the actions of the SCSC. That is why they are having these meetings on various islands. There were a number of Big Island charter school principals present at the meeting. Steve Hirakami from HAS and John Thatcher from Connections were particularly unhappy with their treatment by the SCSC staff and administrator. They voiced frustrations ranging from being unfairly characterized as being in financial difficulty to being forced to immediately respond to arbitrary and often inaccurate dictates from the SCSC staff. Several administrators of Hawaiian Immersion charter schools also expressed their unhappiness with the “one size fits all approach” of the SCSC and their perception that the original goals of the charter school movement such as being incubators of innovation for the overall DOE are being lost. Other general concerns were about the incomprehensible statistical methodology the SCSC is proposing to rank schools, the threatened closure of low performing schools, and the general perception that the SCSC staff and administrator do not understand charter

schools and are establishing an adversarial versus a helpful relationship with the schools. The HI SCSC is the only authorizer of charter schools in the state. According to some of the principals, only 7 out of the 42 or so states that allow charter schools have just one authorizer and all of them have run into problems with their single authorizer. They stated that they have had preliminary discussions with some county officials regarding the possibility of the County of Hawaii of Hawaii becoming an authorizer.

Two former staff members of the SCSC were also present. If I remember correctly they had both recently resigned from the SCSC. One expressed a lot of frustration because he was not allowed to assist schools directly regarding issues with federal grant money. The other was frustrated because while the SCSC is expecting charter schools to meet numerous policy and procedural guidelines on an almost daily basis, the Commission itself has been very lax in creating its own internal policies and procedures.

In general, both BOE members were quite receptive to these public comments and agreed with several specific issues and concerns. Time will tell if they feel the BOE has heard enough to justify more oversight on their part.

Thomas Bearden