



**GRASSROOT
INSTITUTE OF HAWAII**

Nurturing the rights and responsibilities of the individual in a civil society....

Military Charter School Pilot Project

Our Children · Our Schools · Our Future

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1. Introduction – Grassroot Institute of Hawaii (GRIH)

Grassroot Institute of Hawaii is a nonpartisan, public policy research and educational organization dedicated to advancing individual liberty, free enterprise, civil society and responsible government. *Our efforts center around providing public policy research and alternatives in the following foundational areas: state budget and tax policies; welfare, health care and education reform; transportation and environmental issues; and citizenship and governance.*

Grassroot Institute of Hawaii (GRIH) recently developed a three-year strategic plan to improve education outcomes for children in K-12 public schools in Hawaii. One component of the plan, the **Military Charter School Pilot Program**, will demonstrate the importance and effectiveness of local governance, decentralized funding, sound curriculum, and innovative management in improving student outcomes. In addition to improving the public education system in Hawaii, we are trying to create a national movement to establish a network of charter schools to serve military dependents, creating a seamless education system for this very mobile population.

All programs and activities of the Institute are funded through private donations and grants from individuals, corporations and foundations. The Institute does not solicit or accept any funds from public sources. GRIH involvement in this project will be self-funded and independent of the DoD, state Department of Education and individual schools.

2. Background on Education Reform in Hawaii

The state of Hawaii has suffered from an inadequate and ineffective K-12 public education system since its inception as a state in 1959. The size and geography of the state have resulted in a centralized governing structure that fails to recognize local differences and needs. These failings exist in the structure and function of the state's education system as well. Centralized control coupled with a reluctance to change has resulted in the following:

- Hawaii currently ranks 50th out of all 50 states in student achievement on accepted standardized tests in our public schools and last on the Education Freedom Index.
- The core learning objectives implemented by the state are poorly written, vague and rated an “F” by the Fordham Foundation. A classroom teacher cannot identify the specific skills or knowledge base required at any given grade level. The state has been trying since 1994 to implement Standards Based Education. This process is ongoing.
- More than 25 percent of Hawaii's K-12 school-age population attend private/religious schools or are home schooled. Over 50 percent of all school-age children in Honolulu attend private/religious schools. Hawaii boasts the second largest number of private schools per student population in the country. At this time, there are no official figures for the number of military dependent children in Hawaii who attend either are home schooled or attend private schools. Based on informal observation, we estimate the number to be close to 30%.
- The contract between the state and the teachers' union creates one of the most restrictive monopolies in the U.S. Principals are unionized and cannot be “fired”. Union officials can reject any school committee policy recommendation. Principals do not have the right to review lesson plans or evaluate teacher performance. Teachers are evaluated only once every five years. Contractually, teachers are only required to work 190 days per year and 1294 minutes (21.5 hours) per week.

- The Hawaii State Board of Education (BOE) develops policy for the statewide school system based only upon legislative directive. The BOE accepts no accountability oversight for administrators or education outcomes. We are at the point where the legislature is determining/directing classroom texts and curriculum selection.
- The state has maximized bond issues and cannot fund new or additional school construction under the existing system. Military reorganization projects an increase in the number of school-age military children with no plans by DOE to build or expand schools.

As a small and isolated state, the condition of Hawaii’s schools garners little attention in the mainstream press or on the mainland. And yet, children whose parents lack the knowledge or the means for private education continue to suffer.

Current Challenges

Education reform is a slow, tedious process due to the very structure of our state’s education system. The state is one, large, centralized school district under the jurisdiction of an elected Board of Education. The Board hires a Superintendent to administer the program. Most administrative activities are directly driven by the legislature. Accountability is one of our main obstacles to moving forward with any type of reform.

Ten years ago, the state passed a charter school law which has been revised nearly every year since. Currently, the state allows 50 Charter schools—25 new charters and 25 public school conversion charters. The 25 new charters have been issued and are showing good results for student outcomes. Inequitable funding has prevented existing public schools from converting to charter schools. Only two conversion charters currently exist.

Last year, the Governor and the Legislature approved a new plan that gives 23 pilot schools local site councils and more control over budget decisions. That plan will be implemented over a one-year period for only those 23 selected schools before being phased in for the remaining 240 schools. The Governor’s efforts to create smaller school districts and local school boards was fought by the DOE and never made it past the conceptual stage.

Under No Child Left Behind, families whose children attend schools that failed to meet standards for two years in a row have the option of remedial instruction or public school choice. So many schools failed standards that there are few schools to choose. Those that passed are currently overcrowded. The DOE does not provide adequate information to the general public about parents’ rights under NCLB or any hope for improvement.

Opportunities

Hawaii’s existing charter school law gives us an opportunity to implement reforms and indirectly promote school choice without introducing a new program or concept. We plan to accomplish this by facilitating the conversion of an existing public school serving predominantly military children into a “Military Charter School”. Under rules for charter schools, a locally elected Board of Directors develops the business plan and policies for the school. They have the option of selecting curriculum and establishing programs to meet the diverse needs of the military child. Our goal is to model the charter after a DoD school, adopting the similar text and curriculum series, contracting with Department of Defense Dependent Schools for staff training and support.

We can take the best of a private school model, DoDDDES curriculum and programs, coupled with an existing funding source to create a school that will serve the military child. Discussions are currently underway with officials at the Pentagon to use this pilot to create a national network of charter schools serving military children.

The Department of Defense is the second largest industry in our state right behind tourism. The military is, therefore, influential in many policy discussions because of its direct and indirect influence on policy formulation. Our efforts to reform public education in Hawaii begin with the military community because families are mobile and exposed to all types of schools. They are more likely to understand the concept of a local school board, core curriculum and the need for parental involvement than many families in Hawaii who have never experienced public education on the mainland. In addition, members of the GRIH Board and staff are veterans who have a personal interest in caring for military dependent children.

The Military Charter School Project also presents an opening for dialogue with the Department of Defense and the Federal Department of Education to consider using Impact Aid as vouchers for military children in low performing schools. Under the current system, Impact Aid goes directly to a “Local Education Agency” as a tax replacement for county property taxes lost due to a military installation in a community. While this system works well for many states where public education is funded through property tax revenues, the state of Hawaii is one large school district. Impact Aid goes directly into the state DOE general budget with no spending limitations.

3. What is a Charter School?

A charter school is a public school of choice. Principals and teachers choose to work in a charter school. Parents and children choose a charter school because it best fits their educational needs. In Hawaii, a charter school is independent in matters of curriculum, budget, and staffing, but accountable to the Board of Education for non-discrimination, health and safety, Hawaii State Content Performance Standards, and professional treatment of faculty and staff. It operates outside many of the restrictions that apply to a traditional public school.

The only condition of enrollment is whether the school is able to serve the child. For example, if more students apply than the school can accommodate, there may be a lottery to determine which students are accepted, or there may be a waiting list.

When the charter is granted by the Board of Education, each school elects a local school board. This encourages a close relationship among the school, the community and the parents. Unlike a traditional public school, a charter school must succeed to stay in business. Schools may have their charters revoked if they have a deficit or fail to meet the terms of the charter. After four years of operation, the school must apply for renewal of the charter. The basic idea behind charter schools is a trade: increased accountability for increased autonomy.

4. The Conversion Process

Through the Federal government, the state of Hawaii has funds available to school communities who wish to consider converting into a charter school. (Up to \$150,000 per school.) GRIH will work with the school community to prepare the proposal and secure these and other funds for the purpose of research, formulating a decision, and activities needed to transition.

NO FUNDS acquired by the school community will benefit GRIH in any way. GRIH maintains its own funding for its activities with regard to the project.

Once a decision has been made to pursue conversion, The Hawaii Charter Schools Office will assist the school community with the activities needed to convert. GRIH will also assist with training and coordinating with other organizations for training and assistance. The “school Board” will draft and submit a plan to the state Board of Education for consideration. Within 4 weeks, they will receive an answer as to their charter status. The school can then use as much time as needed to implement the plan (usually 6 months to one year.) A military charter school could be up and running in time for the 2006-07 school year.

5. Partners and Assistance

Grassroot Institute of Hawaii is the central planning and coordinating organization for the development of the model and the implementation of the pilot program. We are coordinating with many national and local individuals and organizations to provide assistance to the school community considering conversion:

Nina Rees, Deputy Undersecretary, Office of Innovation and Improvement, United States Department of Education – Nina is the key link to U.S. DOE efforts to improve student achievement through NCLB policies and national dissemination of state successes under NCLB.

Jeanne Allen, President, Center for Education Reform, Washington DC – The Center proved the initial information for model charter school legislation needed to implement an effective charter school program. As we develop the model and pilot, they will be instrumental in helping to disseminate information to their national network of reform advocates.

Leslye Arsht, DoD OUSD (P&R) Military Community and Family Policy - Leslye provides a link to incorporate DoD goals and objectives into the charter school model to best meet the needs of military children. She will also provide information about coordinating with DoDDS for curriculum sharing and potential contracted services. While the project is not affiliated with the DoD in any sense, their goals and objectives are considered throughout the project.

Clint Bolick, President and General Counsel of the Alliance for School Choice - Clint brings his expertise and insight into the issue of school choice programs across the country. Previously, Bolick co-founded and served as vice president of the Institute for Justice, a Washington, D.C.-based libertarian public interest firm. Bolick led the litigation team that defended the constitutionality of school choice programs across the nation. Clint will provide assistance for any legal challenges that might arise out of our efforts at the state level.

Mike Strembitsky, past Superintendent, Edmonton, Canada – Working as a current advisor to Governor Lingle, Mike successfully implemented weighted student formula and school choice in Edmonton, where 90 percent of all funding is spent by individual schools. An experienced motivator, he knows how to put various factions together to achieve efficient management and effective policies leading to local control over those resources, expand school choice and minimize the influence of the teachers’ union in the development of education practices and policy.

Chuck Higgins, Hawaii DOE Charter Schools Office – Mr. Higgins is responsible for the administration of federal funds for Charter Schools. His office will provide the initial start up grant for each school interesting in considering a conversion charter.

Jim Schon, Executive Director, Hawaii Charter Schools Office, DOE – Jim directs the government agency responsible for all charter schools in the state. He and members of his office will provide information, briefings, training and support as needed during the conversion process.

Belle Chasse Academy, New Orleans, LA – The first and only existing charter school for military children. Part of the decision process will involve taking members of the school community to New Orleans to meet with administrators, the Commander, teachers and families to get their views on the charter option. Belle Chasse serves as a model for a military community building a new charter school versus conversion of an existing facility.

Milton and Rose Friedman Foundation – The Foundation provided the initial funding for the project and will continue to support our efforts to replicate the model nationwide. This small but influential foundation is in forefront of the school choice movement in the US.

State Policy Network – GRIH is a member of a coalition of state-based think tanks working to promote the free market, limited and accountable government at the state level. These state organizations will assist with the replication of military charter schools nationwide.

6. Implications

The Military Charter School Project can proceed without any legislative action taken under Hawaii’s existing system to convert public schools into charter schools. However, program and administrative enhancement are possible with some specific legislative action. *Military officials will play no active role in legislative activity.* GRIH will promote model legislation to benefit the military charter school:

- **Allow charter schools to be exempt from collective bargaining.**
- **Designate the Military Charter School as a “Local Education Agency”.**
- **Ensure equitable funding for Charter Schools.**
- **Allow charter schools to contract out student educational services as they deem appropriate.**
- **Allow Alternative Teacher Certification, specifically the ABCTE program.**
- **Allow charter schools to adopt a calendar different from other public schools in the state.**
- **Allow alternate chartering agencies in the state (opens the door for DoDDES to become a national “chartering organization”).**

These above changes require legislative action or a formal decision by the Board of Education to become official. If approved, the changes would make the military charter school model more effective in its operation and administration. *AT THE SAME TIME*, these reforms benefit charter schools and the education reform movement statewide.

The Military Charter School Pilot Project could be used to create a nationwide network of military charter schools, operating on the same calendar year and with the same curriculum to replicate a stateside DoDDES program that is being phased out. This movement would be grassroots driven on a state-by-state basis, and in partnership with the DoD.

7. Next Steps

- GRIH is forming an ADVISORY COMMITTEE of veterans, retired teachers and education activists to provide input on our strategic plan and to help with specific components of the implementation. We need people to write letters to the editor, contact lawmakers and make public presentations in support of the Military Charter School Project. We also need veterans to play an active role by serving on the Charter School Board, providing the continuity and expertise for long term success.

- The next required element to move forward is acceptance by Installation Commanders. The Commander expresses his intent to pursue/consider a charter school conversion to PACOM, who will in turn relay to DoD. Installations must give their permission for Grassroot Institute to “operate” on the installation, hosting education town hall meetings and advertising in local publications.
- The Installation hosts an Education Town Hall Meeting where members of GRIH, DoD, State DOE Charter Schools Office present the conversion charter concept to the general community. Individual school communities vote on whether or not to consider charter conversion.
- School Communities electing to consider conversion form a committee to investigate options. They submit an application for funds from state DOE. GRIH assists with site visit to Belle Chase, provides resources for decisions on curriculum, board composition and financial analysis.
- Committee presents finding and recommendations to entire school community for a vote on pursuing conversion. GRIH provides assistance with the development of the business plan and charter application and subsequent training and transition activities.

The Military Charter School project has immense potential to impact all branches of service within the military community. Its success could also influence wider education reform efforts at local, state and national levels. We have the vision and the plan; we just need a military community willing to lead.