

# POHNPEIAN LEADERS

## Three Principals Model Pacific Educational Leadership

By Tim Donahue

Creative leadership is required to develop and maintain the frequent, ongoing, two-way communications that mark effective community support for schools. This is particularly true in the Pacific, where community involvement has been limited and American style reliance on written communications is ineffective. Three principals in Pohnpei – Mr. Sebastian Amor at Awak Elementary School, Mr. Thomas Artos at Seinwar Elementary School, and Mr. Danis Pol at Ohmine Elementary School – show exceptional skill at developing communications patterns that work.

Photo: Rodrigo Maurício



▷ As principal of Awak Elementary School, Mr. Sebastian Amor uses the Pohnpeian process of consensus building to sustain meaningful community involvement.

### Synthesizing Traditions

Principal Amor's approach is an example of synthesizing the elected and traditional systems. Adapting the mechanism through which traditional title holders relay grassroots opinions up the hierarchy to the high chief, Principal Amor recruited elected community council members to initiate and regulate the process of consensus building. The council members gather input from the community, and the principal uses that input to inform decision making.

However, the principal is careful not to bypass the traditional leadership. He has successfully enlisted the support of the *Nahmwarki*, or high chief. On the basis of his own standing within the title holding system, Amor secures the high chief's validation of decisions on school operations.

Involving students in school/family communications is another example of combining the old and the new. In traditional Pohnpeian education, children are silent learners. Parents observe carefully and gradually increase children's responsibilities as they demonstrate increasing skill.

Principal Amor alters this pattern by encouraging children to

talk about school at home. Students are expected to repeat the daily bulletin he delivers orally. In addition, students are expected to bring to school "current events" from home. However, Amor has kept the tradition of increasing responsibility. As children get older, they are expected to take a larger role, becoming an integral part of school/family communications.

### When Nepotism Works

The situation is quite different at rural Seinwar Elementary School. Originally a parochial school, Seinwar has a 100-year history of community involvement. This tradition was already well established when the school was taken over by the government about 25 years ago.

Principal Thomas Artos built on that tradition by inviting representatives of the local churches, the municipal council, and traditional leadership to serve on the PTA. He has ensured that the three authority systems operating in Pohnpei today communicate with and support the school.

One unique aspect of Seinwar is that the staff is all related. The school benefits because of the island tradition of proprietary rights to important skills. A family that claims rights to a certain occupation must carry it out well. Performing badly would result in a severe loss of face and prestige for the family. The tradition seems to work, since students at Seinwar consistently score highest on Pohnpei's high school entrance test. From an American perspective, Seinwar is an ironic example of nepotism as an effective hiring practice.

### Urban Strategies

Both Principal Amor and Principal Artos have modified Pohnpeian traditions to develop effective school/family communications. The metropolitan environment, however, poses different challenges.

At Ohmine Elementary School, the principal's communications strategy is to promote community ownership. Ohmine is an open campus, and facilities like the computer lab are available for community use both during and after school hours. Intergenerational activities like oral history projects bring parents to the school to continue work started at home. To respect the Pohnpeian preference for decision making by consensus, teachers meet periodically with parent groups off campus to modify the school improvement plan.

Strong leadership is a common thread in these efforts to maintain effective communications. Each principal views communications as critical to building community support, and each takes this responsibility very seriously. The principal's approach varies according to social standing, shifting demographics, and the contemporary flux of culture. The result is communications strategies that effectively localize site-based solutions.

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