

# OUR VISION THROUGH THE YEARS

## A Pacific Perspective on School Improvement

By Martin Weirlangt

The last decade or so has generated efforts to “improve” the ways we teach mathematics and science to our Pacific children. Educators in the island entities were asked to re-examine their teaching goals because times have changed and we must change. Words like *vision*, *standards*, *assessments*, *multiple intelligences*, and *accountability* became part of our vocabularies. Some of us look deep into the meanings of these words to see what they mean for us.

Experience shows that “improvements” are not “one-size-fits-all” solutions. We have learned the importance of understanding and living with cultural diversity. Included in our educational vision is the wish to honor our cultures and traditions. Mathematics and science, with their universalizing approaches, must now find ways to incorporate local practices and beliefs. Content, assessments, and teaching standards were developed locally and regionally in the hope that they would work from both local and global standpoints. The questions these standards seek to answer include: What should be taught? How should it be learned? How was it learned in the past?

**What should be taught?** The vision “All Pacific children will be scientifically and mathematically literate: knowledgeable, capable, and caring” developed by Pacific educators laid the groundwork for what followed. It is reflected in the standards and benchmarks, curriculum frameworks, and lesson plans developed throughout the region.

Let’s pause. Some of you may be asking: then how can we make these lessons culturally unique? Literacy must include knowing and honoring the wisdom of Pacific cultures. We can achieve this by adding to standards and benchmarks our own lessons, like the consequences of nuclear waste in RMI and the value of preserving Palau’s pristine ocean environment.

**How should it be learned?** We now come to planning and delivery. The challenges are great, from meeting our children’s different learning styles to coming to terms with inadequate classroom resources. Most important is what teachers know. This is where professional development comes in. And here, too, teachers can connect culture and content:

- By being in the environment. Take students for walks on Yap’s nature trails or in the Nan Madol ruins.
- By having students participate in tasks. Examples include school taro projects in American Samoa and *sakau* projects in Pohnpei.
- Through observation. Students can learn about the movements of the celestial bodies and about weather and ocean patterns in Yap.
- Through social learning. Students can explore local issues such as rising sea levels in RMI and population growth in Chuuk.

**How was it learned in the past?** Methods of assessment are undergoing scrutiny by educators everywhere. We have learned that pencil and paper tests do not provide real pictures of our children’s learning. Essays, performance assessments, interviews, and portfolios are among the methods now advocated. When these alternative means were initially introduced, they were described as “new.” After a closer look, we realize that some of these “new” methods are actually “old.” Who says that what comes next is always better?

How does the father know that his son is ready to sail his own canoe? Or the mother that her daughter is prepared for her own family? Being together, communicating on the task, and seeing what they can do are some of our ways of knowing. We hope that educators will come to recognize that our ways of knowing are actually compatible with what research now tells us. ★

*Martin Weirlangt is a Program Specialist with the Pacific Mathematics & Science Consortium.*



Photo: Liane Shing

▷ Martin Weirlangt



### PREL Board of Directors

#### CHIEF STATE SCHOOL OFFICERS

**Mr. Henry Falan,**

Director of Education, Yap State Education  
Enterprising Department

**Dr. Rita Hocog Inos,**

Commissioner of Education, Commonwealth of the  
Northern Mariana Islands Public School System

**Mr. Mario Katosang,**

Minister of Education, Republic of Palau Ministry of  
Education

**Mr. Wilfred I. Kendall,**

Minister of Education, Republic of the Marshall  
Islands Ministry of Education

**Mr. Henry Robert,**

Director of Education, Kosrae Department of  
Education

**Dr. Sili Sataua,**

Director of Education, American Samoa Department  
of Education

**Mr. Casiano Shoniber,**

Director of Education, Pohnpei Department of  
Education

**Ms. Rosie Rivera Tainatongo,**

Superintendent of Education, Guam Department of  
Education

**Mr. Kangichy Welle,**

Executive Director, Chuuk State School System

#### CONSTITUENT REPRESENTATIVES

**Ms. Laborday Atanoa,**

Teacher, American Samoa

**Fr. James P. Croghan, S.J.,**

Director, Xavier High School, Chuuk, FSM

**Dr. Randy Hitz, Dean,**

College of Education, University of Hawai‘i  
at Mānoa, Hawai‘i

**Iroij Michael Kabua,**

Marshall Island Mayors Association President,  
Republic of the Marshall Islands

**Ms. Helen Leebeey,**

Teacher, Yap, FSM

**Mr. John Mangefel,**

Former Governor, Yap, FSM

**Ms. Malua T. Peter,**

Former Representative, Commonwealth of the  
Northern Mariana Islands

**Mr. Laurence Vogel,**

President & CEO, Y. Hata & Co. Ltd., Hawai‘i

**Ms. Lynne C. Waihe‘e,**

President, Read To Me International Foundation,  
Hawai‘i

**Mr. Surangel Whipps, Jr.,**

President & CEO, Surangel & Sons, Co., Republic of  
Palau