

# Rethinking Education In Micronesia (Strengthening Leadership and Commitment to Education)

By

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To “rethink education” in Micronesia is a challenging, yet necessary, task and endless endeavor. The struggle to provide quality education to as many students as possible seems an endless task in this region, due to the fact that we continually experience rapid changes in both living and learning environments in Micronesia. Each local education agency and state education agency has been constantly working to bring about improvements in education. But the time has come for educators, leaders, and community members in this region to ask serious questions as we “rethink education” in Micronesia—have we been able to really assess the impact of all the efforts we have made over the years to “improve” the educational system to benefit the children in order to meet the challenges of the 21st century?

There are a number of key questions to ask ourselves. How successful was the implementation effort of various programs we have developed and tried to implement in our schools in the past? How are we doing in terms of sustainability of programs and practices that have been proven successful in yielding students’ high performance and success? How has the accountability and commitment to education by our leaders, parents, and community members been? I believe well thought out answers to these questions will provide us with some understanding that can guide us as we “rethink education” in this region.

To rethink education in Micronesia, we have to have a better understanding of the broad spectrum of experience this region encompasses. Micronesia represents a broad range of linguistic and cultural diversity; and a broad spectrum of experience, knowledge, and diversity; and, of course, a variety of educational needs.

Some of our problems, frankly, have come from both inside and outside of our region. Whenever educators, policy makers, and service providers perform their jobs without really understanding the unique situations and how students learn in island settings, we have problems. We need knowledgeable educators, policy makers, and service providers who know that the challenges of providing quality education to all of our students in Woleiai, Chuuk, Guam, the Marshalls, Palau, and Saipan are not exactly the same. And they certainly are not the same as those of Honolulu, Los Angeles, or the Virgin Islands.

While there are, of course, many similarities between us in Micronesia, our differences are meaningful and important to understand. Sometimes, strategies that work in Los Angeles can be transplanted almost totally and work somewhere in the region. But it should also not come as a surprise to anyone when those strategies, without any modification, don’t work in other settings in Micronesia.

To understand the local struggle for quality education in Micronesia is to know the range of conditions that exist in the region in terms of past and present school improvement efforts.

## GENERAL CLIMATE

In terms of general climate, some of our entities continue to have schools where the school community does share a strong sense of purpose. The morale of all involved is very high, success in school is experienced by most students, and the school is viewed as a place of learning by all concerned. The reverse is also true; we have schools that are at the other end of the continuum. These schools seem to lack people committed to providing quality education. The staff seems to only function from one pay check to the next. There is no real team effort. One can find only a few individuals among the students, staff, and community who seem to care anything about the school or the educational process.

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## PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

With regard to the physical environment of the schools, the range is, perhaps, greatest. There are locations within Micronesia where there are attractive, stimulating classrooms and facilities that are very conducive to effective learning and teaching. They are structurally safe, clean, well lit, climate controlled, and well-equipped. Students can be found working on computers using interactive videos and other multimedia materials and equipment. The classrooms are organized in a manner that invites student learning. Communication and accessibility to Central Office is only a phone call or short drive away.

But as we are well aware, there are still many schools where the physical conditions are quite the opposite. Local educators struggle with a lack of classrooms; three grades may be in the same classroom for split, half-day sessions; blackboards have no chalk, or there is chalk with no blackboard; rain is coming in through the ceiling; on extremely hot afternoons, the air is so still and warm that it is very difficult to keep anyone on task; there is no drinking water or sanitary toilet facilities; no electricity; weekly power outages; no copier, no typewriter, no slide projector, and no radio communication to the Central Office, which can be as far away as a few days by boat.

## CURRICULUM FRAMEWORKS

The situation regarding the status of curriculum frameworks is also broad range. Some of the local educational agencies have articulated well-placed, relevant, dynamic courses of study for the various content areas. The information is “state of the art,” and the students who graduate from their programs will be very knowledgeable of their cultural heritage, languages, surroundings, environment, and the challenges that will face them as Pacific Islanders, and responsible participants in a global community. And yet, the issue of the lack of implementation and sustainability of successful programs continues, and it can hinder student learning to a higher standard. At the same time, there are local educational agencies that still have much to do before the curricula can afford any of their students the foundation for higher learning and thinking skills.

## INSTRUCTION

In Micronesia, instruction can be extremely strong or extremely weak. Some teachers are talented, well-prepared, and trained to address the different learning needs of their students and families. Their students are engaged as active learners. Teachers can be seen coaching each other to excellence. Integrated curriculum activities, whole language activities, bilingual instructional

strategies, cooperative learning strategies, learning centers, parent/community involvement, and literacy campaigns are all part of the regular instructional program.

We also have many classrooms where, day after day, teachers can be found only copying and reading directly from the textbook to their students. Very few higher order questions are asked by the teachers; very little student involvement or interest can be detected; homework assignments are given automatically, often before the lesson has even been taught. There are many teachers who need to be trained for the first time and others who need to be retrained. They have a small amount of knowledge, and not a lot of skill. For some, their concept of what they need to do to deliver effective instruction is, at best, confused.

## PARENT/COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN EDUCATION

In Micronesia, there are schools that are fortunate to have active and effective parent/community involvement in education. The participation of parents and community members can be seen in all aspects of the schools’ programs. They attend; they participate; they teach; they tutor; they help make curriculum and instructional materials; they cook; they buy; and they make decisions that influence the quality of educational delivery. Most of the people involved with education in the region desire and recognize the importance of parent and community participation. They just don’t have it at the level needed yet. And then there are some local educators who are of the mind that parent involvement is too troublesome, time consuming, and lacking any correlation with school success and student achievement.

## STAFF, TEACHER, AND STUDENT DEVELOPMENT

In the area of staff, teacher, and student development, some of the schools within the region have comprehensive training and development programs that go to great lengths to ensure students and staff alike receive the programs and exposure that they need. Teacher in-service training is well-placed, well-timed, thorough, and relevant. Credentialing programs are not only designed to comply with personnel offices’ needs, but are relevant to what the students need.

Extracurricular student development programs for a number of students include student leadership activities, student government, debate clubs, language clubs, sports teams, Close-Up participation, traditional dancing groups, and choir. At the other end of the spectrum, there are some schools where teachers’ in-service training and credentialing yield minimal improvement in the classrooms, where students are bored, uninvolved, and have few opportunities to develop intellectually, socially, and physically.

## EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Finally, looking at educational leadership, there are political appointees who are excellent and those who are not. From Central Office administration to the schools, the profile of educational leaders is again varied. Some of the schools are fortunate to have qualified, dedicated leaders with vision and ability to facilitate important learning improvements. There are team leaders who keep people on task and whom working colleagues and community respect. It is by their example that teachers are able to stay on track and stay committed to servicing all students well. Some of the school systems have administrators who are highly experienced and have had ample training to help them do their job.

On the other hand, there are still schools in Micronesia where the school administrators are not facilitating improvements. In fact, they are a part of the problem. A few of the educational leaders should have never been given their positions. They appear to have no dedication to education, excellence, or quality education, and, the fact is, no amount of training may be enough to change them. Fortunately, the vast majority of educational leaders in Micronesia are not this way. They simply need appropriate support, training, supervision, and coaching to do their job better. It is difficult to do the job of an educational administrator when you only have a high school diploma; or you were selected by the council or chief of the village and told to do the job; or you became the school principal because no one else in your community was willing to do it; or you were forced to do the job and will still have to maintain a full teaching load, and financial incentives and greater prestige would not be forthcoming.

The good news is that in Micronesia school improvement is happening. It is only due to a number of “deficiencies” that progress has been slow. Like many of the school districts in the continental U.S. and other places in the world, Micronesian schools, too, lack adequate numbers of qualified personnel, training, fiscal resources, programs, policies, community awareness and support, adequate incentive programs, educationally-oriented politicians, and the kind of broad-based understanding that is needed to make sweeping improvements.

Progress is happening. Each of the educational entities is moving forward. It is important to keep in mind, however, that people in this region are not all in the same exact place to begin with. Yes, they are from Micronesia, and they have much in common, but they are also very unique from each other. There are different geographical, political, organizational, and economic realities. It is time to use the knowledge, not ignorance of the unique situations in this region to effectively problem solve and improve education. Trust must be built and maintained among Micronesian educators and leaders. The capacity and confidence of local people must be developed and sustained. Educational leaders must have the capacity and confidence to improve educational systems and

the sensibility about what is right and good for Micronesian children. Too often, programs, consultants, and foreign administrators come to Micronesia and attempt to “build for Micronesians” what they think is quality educational opportunity and this is done sometimes with little or no regard for the values, culture, histories, traditional ways of decision making and working together, linguistic heritage, or economic realities. This has not been helpful, and it is not what the people need. Micronesian educational leaders should have the capacity to effectively utilize the wealth of knowledge and expertise from service providers and educational consultants to meet the needs of the children. With great educational leaders, the deficiencies that we continue to see in school improvement efforts—in the areas of school climate and environment, curriculum and instruction, personnel development and teacher training, parent and community involvement in school activities, and the commitment of community leaders to education—can be minimized, and student success will be realized. There is a need to develop great educational leaders in Micronesian education systems.

## WHAT THEN DO WE NEED IN MICRONESIA IN TERMS OF QUALITY EDUCATION?

I believe that most great schools have great leaders. And the key to success in student achievement in school is simply to have great educational leaders in education systems and schools that can facilitate learning. But as I mentioned above, many of our schools do not have educational leaders who understand what it takes to effectively run successful schools. How can effective school leadership be defined in the context of contemporary Micronesian society with the influx of diversity of values and beliefs that have impacted the traditional core values and beliefs for great community leaders? Finding the right answer today, where there are many contributing factors for Micronesian students still struggling to succeed in school, is a challenging but important task for Micronesian educators and community leaders in taking on the important task of rethinking education in Micronesia.

As we seek to improve education in Micronesia, I strongly believe that we must develop capacity and sustainability for great school leaders. We must come up with a mission to develop new educational leadership capacity that fosters high academic achievement of every child by attracting, preparing, supporting, and sustaining the next generation of outstanding leaders for Micronesian public schools. We must seek to build and share understanding of how effective leadership for educational improvement is evolving in schools across the region and help create programs that assist schools and entities in rethinking leadership functions, roles, and practices, and come up with effective leadership focusing on teaching and learning. This will help improve the quality of leadership in public education and improve effectiveness of

school leaders (principals, chiefs, directors, ministers, superintendents) in enhancing accountability, management, and operations of the public school system.

New effort should include school leadership improvement curriculum that incorporates common themes impacting school leadership, such as parent involvement, diversity, and education policy and reform, and be organized into four strands: (1) transformational leadership, which addresses the essence of leadership—the skills, insight, perspectives, personal voice and authority, and change management strategies necessary to lead a school that has high expectations for every child; (2) instructional leadership, which addresses high-quality instruction, thoughtful alignment of curriculum, standards and assessment, effective use of data to drive student achievement, and high-functioning teacher teams; (3) operational leadership, which addresses building and organizational management that supports high student achievement and a positive school culture; and (4) local situation/job context, which addresses the local knowledge, networks, and skills a successful leader needs to support a high-quality school.

A new leadership development program must also be designed to strengthen school and community leaders as they address their own local educational issues: to develop collaborative leadership in order to advance new visions of learning in local communities, develop leadership action related to issues affecting the quality and equity of teaching and learning, and bring new people into leadership whose voices offer new and different perspectives to catalyzing and sustaining community and educational change.

The new paradigm of educational leadership development in Micronesia should focus on the following goals: (1) to enhance the capacity of school leaders to confront and reexamine fundamental beliefs, values, and working assumptions about leadership, learning, and teaching; the allocation and use of time; and the role of family and community in helping their children learn; (2) to build school leaders' ability to develop learning communities for all participants in the education system—children, teachers, parents, support staff, administrators, and community and business leaders; (3) to assist education leaders to develop a road map to establish and sustain conditions that will ensure that all children reach school ready to learn, are healthy and safe and achieve at high levels; (4) to assist educational leaders to develop norms and values that will encourage, reinforce, and sustain teaching and learning environments that result in high levels of learning for all children; (5) to assist educational leaders in developing the leadership capacity of others to sustain learning communities where all participants learn at high levels; and (6) to establish a network of educational leaders to share information, develop deeper understanding of unresolved issues, and document lessons that have been learned for solving problems.

Educational improvement takes time and great effort. Ultimately, we learned that effort must be comprehensive, must focus on problems that are authentic in the context of individual schools and local communities, must have committed leadership, must focus on building and improving capacity for change, and must have the commitment of all the players in order to sustain support and hard work for a long period of time.

Perhaps the most significant reflection we have confirmed for ourselves as we moved from planning to implementing educational programs is that, although actions are important, the thinking that influences and shapes what we do is far more critical. Changing our thinking is the first thing we have to do, both individually and collectively, because without that shift we cannot possibly change what we actually do on a day-to-day basis.

We have much to learn, change, and adopt or reject. All is not perfect and equitable in Micronesia. As stated previously, in Micronesia, we can benefit from technical assistance, ideas, model programs, support for local materials development, and more information about quality programs and sound educational practices, with much cross-cultural problem solving. Most importantly, our ability to build capacity among Micronesian school leaders to implement and sustain successful educational practices and quality programs should be the major effort as we rethink education in the Micronesian region. This has been one of the major contributing factors for both the success and failure of our schools in the education of our children. There is much we can learn from our past effort as we contemplate a new shift of paradigm in educational leadership.

We also know that while sometimes we don't carry the banner high enough for quality education for all in Micronesia, we have strengths inherent in our cultures—we care for each other in ways that ensure that no one goes without food, family support, or a roof above their heads. These values of community and caring are integral and can help us put our heads together to rethink education in Micronesia and find better ways to educate our children for the future.

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