



Hawaii News

Charter schools rip commission overseeing them

Complaints from charter schools about the state agency overseeing them have prompted the Board of Education to take a closer look at the performance of the state Public Charter School Commission.

The BOE — which appoints volunteers to the nine-member commission — voted unanimously Tuesday to form an investigative committee that will determine whether a “special review” of the commission is warranted.

The recommendation came from BOE member Jim Williams, who led an informal listening tour on three islands late last year. Williams will chair the four-member investigative committee, which was formed as a so-called “permitted interaction group” under the state’s open-meetings law, meaning the group will not be subject to the Sunshine Law.

“It seemed that a good place to start in terms of finding out where we are with charter schools was to listen to the schools themselves,” Williams, who served on the commission’s predecessor, the Charter School Review Panel, said Tuesday. “My conclusion is that there were sufficient concerns expressed; they’re broad enough and deep enough that further investigation by the board is warranted.”

A lot of the complaints aired at those meetings, according to a [summary report](#) presented to the board, centered on a breakdown in the relationship between charter schools and the commission and its staff. Some school leaders also said there’s no shared vision for innovation.

“The relationship between schools and the commission and commission staff were (sic) described as contentious, antagonistic, oppositional, and where schools are always on the defense and are always presumed guilty,” the report said.

Catherine Payne, the commission’s chairwoman and a retired public school principal,

said the report presents only “a portion of the picture of charter schooling in Hawaii.”

“Comments and allegations were collected in a manner that made the result predictable and appear here to be presented as facts,” Payne wrote in testimony. “I understand that an individual’s perception can also be his or her reality. I also understand that a few strong voices can disproportionately influence the direction of a discussion.”

The state’s 34 charter schools educate more than 10,400 students. In general, the schools enjoy more autonomy than regular public schools in exchange for more accountability.

The schools are primarily funded with taxpayer dollars through per-pupil allotments — approximately \$6,800 per student this year — but are independently run under contracts, or charters, and report to their own governing boards, with oversight by the commission. The level of oversight imposed by the commission has been a point of contention between the agency and schools that contend the commission is too heavy-handed and routinely infringes on their autonomy.

The 2012 law that established the commission overhauled the state’s charter law and tightened oversight after reports of questionable use of public money, possible favoritism in the hiring of relatives, and poor academic performance at a few charter campuses. The law directs the commission “to authorize high-quality public charter schools throughout the state.”

“It’s a total compliance-oriented attitude,” John Thatcher, principal of Connections

Public Charter School in Hilo, said of the commission. "And it really feels like they're trying to shut down schools."

Several charter school leaders testified Tuesday that they welcome the BOE's involvement.

"All through these years ... there's been a clear vision of innovation, of giving back, so that we can explore positives and negatives to share with the larger system," said Taffi Wise, executive director of Kanu o ka Aina Learning Ohana, which runs a K-12 charter school in Waimea on Hawaii island. "There's obviously a disconnect and an impasse with the vision of where the charter movement is going. Clarify the direction, because for my community, if it's going to go in the current direction, we won't be a school for long — not a charter school."

The BOE's special committee comes at a crucial time in the state's charter movement. The commission recently finalized contract renewal criteria for schools, and for the first time a school's academic and financial performance will determine whether its contract should be renewed when existing contracts expire next summer — a move that has many schools anxious.

The BOE also voted to move ahead with administrative rules to set up a process for eligible entities to apply for chartering authority.