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Crippling cuts await isle charter schools

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Hawaii's 31 charter schools, which already get less money per student than public schools, are facing even tighter budget restrictions next year, cuts that some principals call potentially "devastating."

This is even as enrollment at charter schools has jumped 11 percent.

The \$3.6 million in possible budget cuts next academic year includes \$1.7 million as part of a state government spending crunch due to reduced tax collections in a struggling economy.

"They will be devastating for a number of schools," said Barbara Woerner, director of Innovations Public Charter School, which serves 167 students from first through eighth grade in Kailua-Kona.

[By Alexandre Da Silva](#)

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POSTED: 01:30 a.m. HST, Oct 06, 2008

Hawaii's charter schools, whose enrollment has surged even as regular public schools lose students, face up to \$3.6 million in budget cuts next academic year, a shortfall some fear might be too big for small campuses to handle.

About half of the possible reduction, \$1.7 million, could come through as much as a 20

percent funding cut being considered by Gov. Linda Lingle's administration for all state departments because of slow tax collections.

Charter schools also stand to lose more than \$1.8 million in state Department of Education money that pays for 28 student services coordinators who oversee delivery and federal compliance of special-education programs among other tasks. The Education Department is proposing to eliminate funds for those positions in a plan to trim its \$2.4 billion budget to comply with Lingle's request.

Directors from a number of charter schools complain they already were forced to tighten spending after receiving less in per-pupil funds this year, and that the looming cuts would cripple them.

Dozens of charter school students unsuccessfully rallied at the state Capitol last spring to increase an estimated \$56.1 million charter budget so it would account for a nearly 11 percent enrollment growth after four new schools were approved.

The 7,373 isle children spread among 31 charter schools is up from 6,657 students last year.

But the \$7,100 that charter schools get per student is down about \$1,000 from the previous school year, said Barbara Woerner, director of Innovations Public Charter School, which serves 167 students from first through eighth grade in Kailua-Kona.

She said officials who were planning to ask lawmakers to adjust the charter budget are now worrying about extra restrictions.

"They will be devastating for a number of schools," she said. "We are trying to do a good job. It gets discouraging that every year you have to fight to get so little."

Historically, there has been concern that charter students have gotten less money than traditional public school students, who were each funded by about \$11,531 in the 2006-07 school year. But charter schools get additional money for special education and other services from the Education Department, making the funding comparison difficult to make, officials say.

BUDGET PANEL MEETS TODAY

The state Board of Education Committee on Budget and Fiscal Accountability will meet at 3 p.m. today at McKinley High School to discuss board action on the Charter School Administrative Office's operating and capital improvement budget request for fiscal years 2009 through 2011.

The meeting will be held in Hirata Hall.

The Education Department says that discontinuing the \$1.8 million it provides to charters for student services coordinators would place the alternative schools in the same position as regular schools, whose principals pay for those workers out of their own funds.

James Brese, chief financial officer for the Education Department, said charter schools have been receiving "duplicated" funding for the coordinators through the charter budget.

"They were getting a duplication, or double-dipping," said schools Assistant Superintendent Daniel Hamada.

John Thatcher, director of Connections Public Charter School in Hilo, called that assertion "totally false." He said the Education Department, as Hawaii's sole education agency, is required to fund the coordinators for all public schools, including charters, to meet federal requirements for special-education services.

"So for them to treat charter schools in a manner that is different than they are treating Department of Education schools is really kind of begging a federal lawsuit," he said.

Thatcher, former president of the Hawaii Charter Schools Network, plans to protest the Education Department's budget proposal today, when a Board of Education committee will decide whether to approve it.

"We are all in challenging budgetary times across the board, so what I'm not going to do is point fingers," said Fred Birkett, who is the director of Education Laboratory Charter School and also plans to attend the school board meeting. "We all have to be considerate of each other's needs and not blame anyone."

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