

School program raises DOE concerns

□ Mountain View Elementary has a school-within-school

By Hunter Bishop
Tribune-Herald

Some parents and teachers at Mountain View Elementary School fear that a grassroots effort to improve education may be trampled underfoot by the state Department of Education.

Their "school-within-a-school program," begun three years ago, has become popular with parents and teachers participating in the program, but support from school officials may be waning.

The program, dubbed "Connections" at the K-6 school in upper Puna, is designed to keep each class of students together through sixth grade with the same teachers assigned to each level. Program advocates say it creates a better, more productive learning environment in which teachers and students know one another better within a smaller school population.

Currently 165 students are in the Connections program, which has an administration of teachers and parents who set policies independent of other classes at the school. Mountain View Elementary has a total enrollment of close to 900 students.

But a succession of school

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Parents and students in Mountain View School's Connections Program presented an "Enrichment Day" sampling of cultural diversity for visiting guests on Wednesday. Above, African dancers Erica Pilgrim, left, and Sundari from the group Reggae take time out to help sixth-grader Talia Bailey get in the swing of things. At right, Native American Michael Gates of the Seneca Nation performs the Crow Hop Dance as daughter Tiffany looks on.



T-H photos by William Ing

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principals is eating away at a three-year-old "school-within-a-school" program, parents and teachers say. So they planned a day of student-parent activities Tuesday to demonstrate the effectiveness of the program, and to lobby state Legislators who were invited as guests to help.

Connections began with the school district's support, said Sally Wilburn, a parent and program advocate. But last year Principal Michael Tokioka eliminated a key aspect of the program. And this year, new principal Clifton Iwamoto is considering whether the program should be continued at all.

Tokioka took away the voluntariness of the program. Citing a possible problem with equal access to the program, he let all of the existing Connections students remain if they wished, but starting last year, students were assigned to the program without choice.

Sixth-grade Connections teacher Frank Thatcher said that, as a result, some students whose parents want them in the program now can't get in, while

parents of some who are in don't want their children there.

Wilburn said the state Attorney General's office has determined there is no legal equal problem and that students should be allowed in the Connections program by choice. She said the program should be expanded if demand requires it, and that until last year there was a waiting list of up to 19 students.

State schools Superintendent Herman Aizawa said by telephone from Honolulu Tuesday that he urges caution in setting up school-within-a-school programs because they may lead to divisiveness.

"Unknowingly, or unwittingly, they may cause a divisive situation," Aizawa said. "That doesn't mean that a school should not do it. All I did was mention they should be aware of that."

Parental involvement is a key element of the program — and one of its drawbacks, Thatcher acknowledged. The voluntary aspect of Connections tends to attract parents who are more directly involved in their chil-

dren's education, which may leave fewer active parents in other classes.

"The program gets all the good parents," some teachers complain, said Thatcher.

Those "good parents," however, claim the six-year program gives students a smaller, more familiar climate in the classroom that is conducive to learning, order and self-esteem, and that more students should have that opportunity.

"We've given them the 'vil-lage' that we're all talking about," Wilburn said. "They can become someone without being just another child in the system."

Wilburn said the parents are looking for change in the way their children are being taught in public schools. "We're willing to bring change to education," she said. "But we're coming up against a lot of obstacles."

Parents want the element of choice brought back and at least another three years in order to evaluate the first full class that moves throughout the program. "Otherwise we'll never know if it works," Wilburn said.

Iwamoto said he is still evaluating the program he inherited, and probably won't make a decision until the end of the year. Meanwhile, he is keeping the program as he found it, with new students assigned to it without choice.

"I support the Connections concept," Iwamoto said, "but many things I haven't grasped as to why the program is here."

State Sen. Wayne Metcalf (South Hilo-Puna), state Reps. Robert Herkes (Puna-Ka'u) and Eric Hamakawa (South Hilo-Puna), and Big Island member of the state Board of Education Herbert Watanabe attended the presentations of parents and students Tuesday.

Thatcher told them that legislation allowing spin-offs like Connections to become charter schools would help. He also said the Connections supporters back legislation endorsing the school-within-a-school concept.

Parents will be lobbying the state Board of Education at next month's meeting, Wilburn said.

Aizawa said Tuesday he would like to see the problems worked out on the school level.