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Charter schools object to DOE plan to cut \$1.9M for coordinators

DOE plan would slash \$1.9 million for student services coordinators

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Charter school administrators are criticizing a budget-cut proposal by the state Department of Education that would slash about \$1.9 million for student services coordinators.

The proposal, part of the public education system's effort to cut up to \$69 million from its budget, would affect 28 student services coordinators across the state's charter school system.

The coordinators, known as SSCs, have many responsibilities, including organizing special-education services, counseling, tutors or other kinds of special help that students may need.

Charter school administrators say they plan to fight the proposal, which will be considered by the Board of Education this week.

"I don't think it really is an option for a school not to have an SSC," said John Thatcher, principal of Connections Public Charter School on the Big Island.

"Now the charter schools are going to have to find a way to pay for these positions. All this does is shift the burden of payment from the DOE to the charter schools."

Already, charter officials say their schools are strapped for cash, especially considering a more than 10 percent reduction in their per-pupil allocation this past legislative session. They say this cut would mean the schools would have to fund their SSC — considered a vital part of the educational operation — from per-pupil funding, which is currently about \$7,200 per student.

But DOE officials say the \$1.9 million cut actually eliminates duplication in the budget.

Currently, all public schools pay for their SSC through their per-student funding formula, known as the "weighted student formula." However, DOE officials said charter schools have been receiving a separate check to pay for their SSC even though their per-pupil money should cover the salary for that position.

"Basically ... the charter schools were double dipping. They were essentially getting the funding twice," said James Brese, chief financial officer for the DOE.

'this is really unfair'

Even after the cut is made, charter schools will still have money for these positions, Brese said.

Charter school officials, however, say if they were to lose the additional money they receive to pay for their SSCs, it would be close to impossible to pay for the positions out of school funds.

"They are not covered in the existing budget we have right now," Thatcher said. "We feel this is really unfair. We've already been cut."

Under the state budget approved last legislative session, Hawaii's public charter schools got about \$57 million for this school year, up from \$51 million last year. However, the increase didn't keep up with the robust growth in charter school enrollment, which left charter schools at a 10 percent decrease in their per-student budget.

The proposed \$1.9 million budget cut is part of a larger \$31.5 million budget reduction proposal unveiled by the state Department of Education last month. The cut represents about 10 percent of the public school system's discretionary budget.

Gov. Linda Lingle asked all state agencies to come up with 10 percent, 15 percent and 20 percent budget-cut scenarios for their 2009-11 discretionary budget because the state's slowing economy has eroded tax revenue.

While charter school administrators say they understand the DOE's tough budget situation, they oppose cutting money for people who provide educational services in the schools.

The job of a student services coordinator is to assure that each student receives the kind of help that he or she may need, said Daniel Hamada, DOE assistant superintendent for curriculum, instruction and student support.

"The student services coordinator does not address only special education. We're also talking about English Language Learners ... even something as simple as tutoring," Hamada said.

many tasks

Glen Kila, chief executive education officer at Kamaile Academy in Wai'anae, said his SSC coordinates services for many of the homeless or impoverished students who attend his school.

"We have a very high percentage of special-education students, about 17 percent. That's higher than most schools," Kila said.

Kila said the SSC has so many tasks that it would be difficult for a school to operate without one.

"The SSC plays a big role in supporting the child's education and making sure the help a child may need gets delivered," he said.

Janene Cooney, student services coordinator at Kamaile Academy, tracks support services for nearly 150 students daily.

She makes sure students with disabilities, social or emotional issues, speech issues or other challenges get the help they need.

It's also her job to work with teachers to monitor when students may be falling into problems and working with parents to come up with an intervention.

"If a child is in a general education setting and not developing as well as they should be, I have to go in to make observations," Cooney said.

Maunalei Love, interim executive director of the Charter School Administrative Office, said the charter schools plan to request the \$1.9 million from the Legislature in the upcoming session.

"The CSAO added the ... budget request as soon as we found out these positions were cut from the DOE budget," Love said in an e-mail.
