

Name in the News: Philip Bossert

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*Phil
Bossert,
executive
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The latest project for Philip Bossert, executive director of the Hawaii Association of Independent Schools, is shepherding through a bill that clarifies a law ensuring that all private schools in the state are licensed.

All 50 states regulate private education and, since 1996, the state Department of Education transferred that regulatory responsibility to an HAIS subsidiary, the Hawaii Council of Private Schools. More recently there have been some under the impression the licensing is optional, he said, so Senate Bill 980 seeks to straighten that out.

The purpose of licensure is to ensure health and safety, basic credentials and capacity to deliver a program — not to dictate what that program should be, he added. He's hopeful he can allay critics' concerns.

Bossert, 75, has quite the resume, but he's not done yet. Along with state schools Superintendent Christina Kishimoto, he has produced the Schools of the Future Conference. At October's event, the keynote speaker will be founder of the online Khan Academy, Salman Khan.

Overseeing a nonprofit that supports private schools has been his focus for the last two years, but his own academic history led him first to a doctorate in philosophy. He's written books on information technology, education and philosophy.

The former president of Hawaii Loa College, before it merged into Hawaii Pacific University, Bossert has worked in higher and lower education, in planning and information systems, as head of the High Tech Development Corp. and many other posts.

Part of that journey took him to the Research Corporation of the University of Hawaii, where he headed a project to develop an internet services system for the state's public schools. UH President David Lassner called it quits on Bossert retirement parties.

"He says, 'I'm so tired of Philip Bossert retiring from one position after another — he just wants the gifts,'" Bossert said with a laugh.

Question: What are the revenue sources for HAIS, and what services does it offer members?

Answer: HAIS receives about 40 percent of its revenue from member dues, about 45 percent from the professional development programs that we offer for members and 15 percent from grants and contracts that we administer on behalf of several education partners.

Our primary services to independent schools are licensing and accreditation of private schools, followed by professional development programs, and lastly the marketing of private education in Hawaii.

Of the 160-plus private and parochial schools in Hawaii, 92 are currently members of HAIS and/or its subsidiary, the Hawaii Council of Private Schools (HCPS).

Q: What are the factors behind declines in private school enrollment?

A: Hawaii's private school enrollments as a percentage of total K-12 enrollment in the state have remained fairly consistent over the past 30 years: 14 percent to 16 percent. There has been a drop of about 2,000 students over the past 10 years, mostly due to the financial downturn that began around 2008-9.

There was also an unusual drop in the total school-age population in Hawaii from 2000 to about 2015 that affected both public and private school enrollments.

Q: Does the association work with schools on financial sustainability? If so, how?

A: HAIS offers workshops on financial management and sustainability, often in cooperation with the National Business Officers Assn. (NBOA) and the American Fundraising Professionals (AFP). Also, when HCPS goes through the basic licensing checklist with a school, a school is asked about its financial resources and financial viability.

When HAIS accredits a school, the process is considerably more rigorous and a school must provide as part of its detailed self-study enrollment and financial documentation, audited financial statements and future financial planning strategies.

Schools sometimes still get in financial trouble, often because they have become dependent upon a single large donor or external source of funds. Several schools have closed over the past several years because a wealthy founder or board member who was providing a significant donation each year suddenly died or moved on....

Very few of Hawaii's private schools have endowments; most are primarily tuition-driven with perhaps a bit of support from their annual fund drives.

Q: Do you see the public charter school movement as a competitor for private enrollment?

A: I have always understood charter schools as being essentially publicly funded private schools. A charter school has its own board of directors, has a lot of latitude in the selection of its curriculum and instructional strategies, and usually also has its own 501(c)3 fundraising affiliate.

There are some excellent charter schools in Hawaii; but I don't think that the charters have for the most part attracted students away from Hawaii's private schools.

In general, I don't really think there is a "competition" between public and private schools — it is more the result of parental mindset. Some parents — especially those who attended private schools themselves — want to send their kids to private schools, and some parents want their children to attend public schools.

In some cases, the decision may be financially driven, but more often I think it is because some people just believe in public education and some just believe in private education.

There are some excellent public schools in Hawaii; and our new superintendent, Dr. Christina Kishimoto, is very visionary, and I think that she is going to help develop many more excellent, innovative public and charter schools in the years to come.

But, in the end, I don't think that will change the basic mindset of most people toward public and private education. Hawaii needs both excellent public schools and excellent private schools.

Q: What is the strategy for improving compliance with the association's own licensing system?

A: Our efforts at the Legislature last year and this year have been to further clarify this distinction between the two types of regulatory reporting. We believe that the intent of the 1996 and 1999 legislation was that all K-12 private schools must be licensed in order to verify that they are safe, healthy, educationally sound learning environments for children; and that this not "optional."

And we believe that a school that cannot meet the very minimal requirements set forth in the regulatory checklist should have their business registration revoked.

Q: Does the closure of Saint Francis send any messages other private schools need to hear?

A: It is truly sad when a school that has been providing an excellent education environment for almost 100 years is forced to close. Usually a school as old and established as Saint Francis has an alumni base that provides significant financial resources annually that can be used in addition to tuition for operations. That was apparently not true in this case.

I think many of the Catholic schools are in a double bind at present. Historically, most of the faculty for these schools were members of religious orders who taught basically for just room and board.

The Catholic Church has experienced a significant decline in the number of persons joining religious orders in recent years; and, as a result, the schools have had to replace the almost free labor of sisters and brothers with lay faculty at competitive salary rates. This has required most of the schools to raise their tuitions significantly....

Many parents — not just Catholics, but from all faiths — felt that Catholic schools were a great private school bargain; dedicated, well-educated faculty and low tuition rates. However, as the tuition for these schools has increased, many of those parents ... began treating the Catholic schools as just another private school and may have decided to move their children elsewhere.

Rising costs and falling enrollments are not very good partners. This is true for all private schools, not just parochial schools.

