

Navigating NCLB in Pacific Waters: Capacity Building and Community Education

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Background

The *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB) legislated greater accountability for educational results. It emphasized teacher competence; teaching strategies that work, particularly in reading; funding flexibility; increased local control; and increased options for parents. The lofty goal of NCLB was to provide the highest quality education to all students, including those generally considered disadvantaged primarily due to poverty. The actual focus of the controversial legislation has been on accountability via test scores.

One of two major criticisms of NCLB is that the United States (U.S.) Federal Government imposed requirements without providing additional funding to support the additional effort required. A second criticism is voiced mostly in the Pacific: NCLB dropped the Freely Associated States (FAS) from eligibility for most federal programs. While this struck a considerable blow to FAS education systems, one result was positive—the FAS is no longer legally mandated to follow NCLB requirements. Other Pacific jurisdictions, like American Samoa and Guam, are held to the mandates. (Heine, 2002) Nonetheless, all FAS jurisdictions have instituted NCLB-like

initiatives. FAS educators recognize that their fate—and federal funds—are linked to maintaining close ties to the U.S. and to U.S.-led educational initiatives. Hope remains strong that such initiatives, generally research-based, can be made culturally and philosophically relevant to the Pacific, thereby strengthening education systems across the Pacific.

As an indigenous educator, albeit not a Pacific Islander, I spent almost 10 years working in the Pacific: 5 years at Pacific Resources for Education and Learning (PREL) and 4.5 in the U. S. Department of the Interior's Office of Insular Affairs. For the last 4+ years, I've worked exclusively with the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) and the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI). Most of my examples will flow from my more recent experience.

Prior to working in the Pacific, the majority of my career had been spent working in the area of American Indian education. I am a member of the Sault Ste. Marie Chippewa tribe of Michigan. I recognize many similarities between the cultures of Pacific Islanders and that of American Indians. We share a similar history, having been colonized by various countries, the last being the U.S. We share a love of independence. The Constitution of the U.S. recognized tribes as sovereign nations, a status still upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court. On the other hand, the FAS had to seek and win independence from the U.S., in 1979 for the Republic of the Marshall Islands, and 1986 for the Federated States of Micronesia. The labels

American Indians and Pacific Islanders disguise a wealth of cultures and languages. There is no one static culture, but diverse cultures based on history, geography, and other factors. The U.S. federal government currently recognizes 561 distinct American Indian tribes. Each American Indian tribe and each Pacific island nation possesses unique languages found nowhere else on the planet. We share a love of the land, our home—the traditional territory of which we are the caretakers. Further, we retain common values, such as sharing, cooperation, group (versus individual) consciousness, to name but a few. These values were passed from generation to generation. We now find ourselves living in changed, “modernized” societies; nonetheless, our traditional values retain a strength that influences our daily thinking and interactions.

A key value that remains strong in both communities is the importance of the family and community. By family, I refer to the extended, not nuclear, family. Indigenous peoples are tied to their family and community, and vice versa. Each is essential to the others’ survival. I see in Pacific Islanders that familiar need to work for the betterment of one’s people to uplift future generations. My mother’s people in Canada believe that decisions must be made considering their impacts on the next seven generations.

In our traditional societies, children were taught by seeing then doing. An older relative would model how to weave a basket or

a mat, for example, or how to plant and care for certain crops. The education of children was everyone’s responsibility, since their knowledge affected the survival of all. Regrettably, contemporary school systems often ignore the influence and strength of the family and community.

Accountability via Community Education

Returning to our topic of NCLB and its impact on Pacific education, there is one mandate within NCLB that has been overlooked: the call for increased parental and community involvement and control. Research has shown that engaging parents and the community in education is a fundamental best practice. It leads to improved attendance by students and teachers alike; it leads to improved teacher performance; and it leads to improved academic performance of students (Carter, 2008; Public Agenda Online, 2002; Onikama, Hammond, & Koki, 1998). Yet, it is a best practice we have yet to implement uniformly throughout the Pacific.

Without the strong engagement of parents and community members from all levels of society, we run the risk of focusing our attention only on the NCLB-driven academic aspects of education, and ignoring the societal aspects of education. What do I mean by the societal aspects of education? I’ll answer by posing a series of related questions.

What if the national tests were perfectly aligned with the local curriculum? What if all the teachers had no less than an AA or AS degree? What if all staff members were well-trained on the use of data, and all schools routinely submitted their data in a timely manner? Would we then have the perfect school system? Would we be assured of sufficient funding to improve facilities? Would we have full governmental support to fully fund ongoing professional development of all personnel to improve the academic performance by teachers and staff alike? Would individual communities automatically and routinely take a strong stand to continuously improve education for their children? I confess that I doubt it. Academic improvements alone would influence and instill pride in some parents and community members, but are insufficient to ensure that all aspects of an education system will be adequately supported—financially and socially—by the various levels of society.

We cannot focus only on the academic issues of a school system. We must also address how that school system functions within a community context. Education systems do not operate in isolation or in a vacuum. They function within a society. They function within a politically charged social system. Education staff may be top notch and perform to the best of their ability every day, but if education lacks the economic and political support of the local community, as well as national politicians, it will be difficult to advance beyond basic performance toward overall educational excellence.

We know that there are several historical reasons why strong community support has been lacking for public education. During the various colonial administrations, including that of the U.S., the schools were operated by outsiders and used as a tool to instill loyalty in Pacific citizens to the colonizers' language and ways. Parents and community members were shown or told how education would be for their children; their input was never sought (Donahue, 1998).

In Pacific societies, we also know there are cultural norms that give authority and decision-making power to the traditionally chosen leader. In historical times, if a school building was needed, it was the role of the traditional leader to decree it, and the community members would build it. In contemporary educational settings, the director of education and the local principal are viewed as those with authority. Community members are loath to impose themselves when not asked. Expanded community involvement must be invited.

Communities must also agree on the value of education in order to support it. In historical times, as mentioned earlier, indigenous peoples saw education as a natural daily activity that contributed to their community's existence. Under foreign administrations and during Trust Territory days, education was imposed, and few recognized its value. Nowadays, we often hear that young people need an education to get ahead, to get into college, and/or to get a well-paying job. Yet, such arguments mean little to Pacific island youth who love their

island home, wish to remain in their community, prefer not to travel abroad to attend college, and see rare opportunities for well-paying jobs at home. Today, more Pacific Islanders understand how a formal education can enhance their future, but this attitude is still not universally shared (Hezel, 2001).

In spite of a history of low community involvement in education, it is timely to give serious consideration to the value of expanded community involvement in education and the need for a program to educate the community about their role in education. As Marshallese educator, Hilda Heine (2005), writes: “Families and communities must rethink school ownership and reclaim the education process. The time is now” (p. 4).

Examples of Community Engagement in Education.

From the continental U.S., we’ll look at one example of an initiative started by education personnel and community members to improve their school. Thomas Edison Elementary School is located in Port Chester, New York. It is a K–5 school with a student population that is primarily poor and immigrant. Their families face various obstacles, including housing, nutrition, and health care—all of which affects the students’ readiness to learn. In 1999, staff members and community stakeholders began meeting to gain a deeper understanding of the societal conditions affecting the students and their ability to learn. Edison Elementary staff surveyed students, parents, and

community members about student needs and related concerns. Then, one by one, they found ways, working together, to address each concern. They created a community school advisory committee with greater authority than the average Parent Teacher Association (PTA). They cultivated community partners to address such issues as student health needs, parents’ needs for guidance on school expectations, and teachers’ in-service professional development needs. They immediately addressed language barriers and commenced weekly bilingual gatherings for parents. After school enrichment programs were designed to benefit students and their working parents. As one might expect, all of the school-community efforts paid off in improved student test scores and more. It took time, patience, and determination, but Edison Elementary now considers itself a full service community school that addresses students’ social, emotional, physical, and intellectual needs (Santiago, Ferrara, & Blank, 2008).

A second, and distinctly different, model for community involvement is an international one. Paulo Freire, an educator in Brazil, proposed this model. In the late 1950s, he commenced an adult literacy campaign among Brazil’s poor, rural farm workers. Translated into English, his campaign was called *Bare Feet Can Also Learn To Read*. Central to his emphasis on reading was a concept termed “conscientization,” which he interpreted as critical consciousness. Freire saw the need to break from a national past characterized by

authoritarianism, imposed silence, and withholding education from the poor. His adult students learned new vocabulary by discussing social issues of the day. In time, the farm workers realized they had opinions and a collective voice that could contribute to societal decision-making. Freire's methods successfully heightened public awareness and empowered the poor. Unfortunately, his educational success led to his being seen as a serious threat by large landholders, which led to his being jailed and ultimately exiled for 15 years. He continued his community education work outside of Brazil until his death in 1997 (Freire, 2000). A valuable lesson from Freire's work is that everyone has an opinion about their life, their child's education, and other significant social issues. What the Brazilian farmers lacked was information, new vocabulary, and the freedom to express their beliefs and desires. In Pacific education today, we need more public awareness and public voice to give direction to necessary changes in the current education system.

Local examples of parental and community engagement in education can be found across the Pacific. The RMI has an excellent model described by our friend and colleague, Evelyn Joseph, in her accompanying article. In Chuuk, school community-based management models have been established at several schools (Petrus, 2001). In the FSM, by 2009, all four states are to produce school-based budgets. Kosrae has already implemented site-based budgeting for the last 3 fiscal years.

NCLB urges such examples of decentralization and increased parental participation in program planning, assessment, and accountability. A goal should be the establishment of many more models of community involvement in the education process.

Leadership and Communication

From the years of research on high performing schools, what do we know about these schools that excel? Inevitably, they possess strong leadership both *within* the school (e.g., the principal's leadership skills are critical) and *outside* the school (e.g., parents; community members; church leaders; traditional leaders; elected officials, such as the mayor) (Emesiochl, 2007).

In addition to engaging the community affiliated with a specific school, education also needs an ongoing campaign to engage the general public, including local, state, and national legislators. A public education campaign that stresses the value of education to the community, as well as the nation, requires leadership and a long-term commitment, which should include assigning to it a staff and budget. A few years ago, the FSM and RMI commenced a public education campaign in collaboration with Micronesian Seminar. Two videos were produced and widely disseminated. One offered a dramatization of PTA members asking about the benefits of academic, vocational, and cultural education for their children.

Another video spotlighted schools of excellence across Micronesia. The RMI sponsored and continues an island-wide Education Day event focusing on student and school successes. It would be wonderful to see similar public education campaigns revived and extended across all Pacific jurisdictions.

Any public education campaign would naturally have to be designed to match the diverse Pacific cultures, traditions, attitudes and behaviors. We would also have to keep in mind that traditional communication systems may limit free flowing communication among social classes and between genders. While contemporary communication may allow for greater flexibility among education staff and/or community members, job titles may still restrict conversation. We have all experienced meetings where only the director of education, or a similarly high-ranking official, was expected to be the sole voice on a topic. While our goal is to engage as many community members as possible as active partners in supporting education, we must keep in mind that education systems operate within tradition-rich and politically charged social systems. It is up to us to find creative ways to operate within such systems. It's noteworthy that strong emphasis is placed on communication with family members in the Cluster Model originated in the RMI [see Evelyn Joseph's chapter on the Cluster Model].

A Sample Public Education Campaign

Let's look at a concrete example of an education-related issue that needs attention and consider ways to launch a public education campaign about it. I'd suggest the issue of youth suicide in the Pacific as a dramatic example of a longstanding community concern that impacts parents, educators, and community members alike. Each year, we read newspaper articles on or hear of the increasing numbers of Pacific youth who attempt or succeed at suicide. That trend is alarming to all of us. The causes for suicide are usually cited as conflict within the family, the breakdown of the extended family, lack of self-esteem, substance abuse, and/or romanticizing suicide (Hezel, 1990).

When a suicide occurs, fellow students and school staff are usually among the first to know. All community members are affected to varying degrees. Adults begin to worry about a possible chain reaction of further suicides. Education systems know all young people in their community, whether enrolled in school or not. But school staff, alone, cannot prevent suicides. How do we involve others who may have a positive influence on a troubled youth or dysfunctional family? What does it take to engage the mayor, traditional leaders, extended family members, K-12 staff, college faculty, counselors, PTAs, legislators, business owners, church officials, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and young people themselves in a dialogue and plan of action to address this

frightening social and education issue? Who in our communities is already talking about this significant issue? What influence does culture have on this issue? Is the topic taboo among some community members? Is this strictly a “modern” issue? How would suicidal behaviors be handled traditionally?

We need to expand the network beyond the usual community activists. You never know where the next great idea for suicide prevention or intervention may come from. Are there other natural, nontitled leaders in the community who should be brought to the table? Are there male and female elders who could talk with youth when problems arise? What specific action can community organizations and NGOs take? How can parent groups strengthen family members’ ability to address family tensions in a constructive way? Are there youth-to-youth groups that could be activated? Can we make peer counseling and peer tutoring available? Are there ways to involve youth in community projects so they feel a deeper connection to the community, if not their family?

A key ingredient needed to establish and sustain a public education campaign about youth suicide, or any issue, is public will. We must not shy away from issues that may frighten us or about which we don’t feel we have enough information. It is more important to act; we act because we care about our young people, and we don’t want them to suffer or even contemplate suicide as an option. Earlier in 2008, the film, *Morning Comes*

Too Soon, was completed in the RMI. Marshallese teenagers took it upon themselves to dramatize and film their concerns about this social concern. In July 2008, it helped inform a film festival audience in Hawaii. The film represents a courageous step forward made by Pacific teens to address suicide among their peers.

A Public Education Campaign on Education

As stated earlier, teen suicide is a dramatic and emotional example of an issue that needs attention and that calls us to take action. In a similar fashion, the education system serving our youth cries out for and deserves our attention. We have many well intentioned, far-sighted people working in education, and we have witnessed improvements, but we still have critical infrastructure issues to be addressed. There are still far too many teachers without AA or AS degrees or teaching credentials. We have principals who lack the skills to be the educational leaders they need to be at their school. We lack culturally appropriate teaching materials in English or the vernacular. Students are being shortchanged, and we should be vocal in our opposition to things continuing as they have.

To take a stand and fight for an improved education system requires the same key elements discussed earlier. We need leadership, communication, public will, and a sustained public education campaign. We need to enliven the debate about education. Whose form of education do we want for our youth?

Who should be active in the discussion of the future of education to enhance nation building? We need everyone—students; parents; extended family members; college faculty and staff; traditional leaders; legislators; business owners; church leaders; NGOs; health professionals; counselors; Pre-K to grade 12 staff, including bus drivers, cooks, and maintenance staff. Everyone needs to find their voice and speak up to improve education, because they care about the youth, and they care about their own community, state, and nation.

Without strong public support and legislators who are willing to champion the cause of education, there is little external pressure to improve our schools, not only academically, but also structurally. A flawed state or national governance system that does not view education as a national priority means schools will continue to deteriorate and function without electricity. Children sitting on damp cement floors will continue to be the norm. Girls will continue to drink no liquids during the hot days, because they can't bear to use the dirty restrooms. We need action and, as quoted earlier, "The time is now."

Parents and community members need to find their voice, like the community at Thomas Edison Elementary School in New York, and like the farmers in Brazil. Parents and community members need to express publicly in PTA meetings, on the radio, in hearings, in newspaper interviews, in church

newsletters, and through other media, like film, that education *must* be a national priority. It is time for traditional and elected leaders to move beyond the *words* that the children are our future. They must show by *actions* and *funding* increases that they are committed to a strong future for the children and the country as a whole. *Public* and *political will* must be developed in support of education.

Throughout the Pacific, in recent years there has been a call to rethink education. Conferences have been held to deliberate on how Pacific education can be made more compatible with Pacific cultures, values, and beliefs. Pacific authors joined forces to create resource materials, such as the volume *Tree of Opportunity: Rethinking Pacific Education*. Likewise new organizations have been created, such as the Commission on Education in Micronesia (CEM). Such resources and organizations serve an invaluable role. They stimulate the necessary debate about education and action among educators. But they cannot do it alone. The capacity of schools to excel is directly linked to public education campaigns and other capacity building efforts among all stakeholders—students, parents, education staff, the general public, and legislators at all levels of the government. The form that the capacity building takes will depend entirely on the values, attitudes, belief systems—and creativity—inherent in each jurisdiction.

The Rethinking Pacific Education movement has resulted in new ways of thinking about education. Pacific educators are

resolute in their belief that education no longer has to follow a western model. Traditional ways of teaching and learning are being reintroduced. Local authors, telling the “story” from the Pacific point of view, are writing history and other textbooks. When education again feels like a Pacific-owned social process, it will be natural for parents and community members to support it without reservation. In the meantime, campaigns that inform and engage families, communities, and the public at large to support education will still be needed.

About the Author

Joann Sebastian Morris has worked to serve the educational needs of indigenous people most of her adult life. Born in Michigan of a Sault Ste. Marie Chippewa Indian father and an Oneida Indian mother, she started her career as a teacher, then moved into administration, and later research and training. For 3 years prior to her move to Hawaii, Joann was the Director of Indian Education working for the U.S. federal government, overseeing the education of American Indian children attending Indian reservation schools across 26 U.S. states. From her parents, she learned the necessity of being an advocate for American Indian people. She transferred those advocacy skills to her work with Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders while at PREL. Even as a grants manager for the U.S. Department of Interior’s Office of Insular Affairs, Joann felt compelled to advocate for the best education possible for Micronesian students. In late summer 2008, Joann moved to

Washington, DC, to work at the National Education Association (NEA), the nation’s largest union for educators. There, her past experiences are being put to good use in her new capacity as a Senior Policy & Program Analyst. She’s training minority and women educators for leadership positions and advocating specifically for the educational needs of American Indian and Alaska Native students and teachers.

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