

HAWAII NEWS

Proposed raises for Hawaii DOE executives reduced

By [Esme M. Infante](#) • Today • Updated 11:02 pm

A proposal to dramatically raise salary ranges for 25 top state Department of Education executives had to be scaled back after it drew angry reactions Thursday not only from scores of school-level employees and their union, but several state Board of Education members as well.

The initial proposal presented to the board by state schools Superintendent Keith Hayashi had called for increasing base pay by about \$13,000, and maximum pay by about \$22,000, for three groups of superintendents who work under him:

>> 15 complex-area superintendents, whose salaries currently have a base of \$152,250 and maximum of \$183,750, with a proposed new range of \$165,000 to \$205,000.

>> Seven [assistant](#) superintendents, whose current pay range is \$157,000 to \$189,000, with a proposed new range of \$170,000 to \$210,000.

>> Three deputy superintendents, whose current range is \$162,750 to \$194,250, with a proposed new range of \$185,000 to \$225,000.

However, the proposal drew so many strong objections — some philosophical, others technical — that it was pared down by a board committee to include pay-range increases only for the complex-area superintendents, and amended with conditions, before it was finally approved by the full BOE. The proposed pay-range increases for the assistant superintendents and deputy superintendents were deferred.



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The board conditioned its approval for increasing the salary range for complex- area superintendents on the DOE’s developing a detailed proposal for determining pay amounts based on such criteria as qualifications and experience.

“Never in my 17 years have I seen such a top-heavy leadership that puts themselves before the needs of students and their employees,” Karen Kama, a DOE speech-language pathologist, said in her testimony before the board about the initial proposal. “We (pathologists) have been at the same salary rating scale for over 20 years with minimal raises. ... From hire to retire, a qualified SLP with 20 to 30 years’ experience makes only \$747 more than a new hire — but the DOE leadership can give themselves raises.”

Of roughly 200 pages of public testimony submitted to the board on the issue, the vast majority of the letters also strongly opposed raising the DOE executives' salaries. Many letters were from educational assistants, speech-language pathologists and other school support workers who were incensed that the DOE would prioritize raising top leaders' salaries.

Educational assistants earn about \$2,500 per month; janitors, about \$3,800. Lei Tata, who works as an educational assistant for the DOE, called her paycheck "laughable."

"Why is the DOE focused on boosting the salaries of administrators who need it the least? Where are the DOE's priorities?" she said in written testimony. "The DOE should be focused on recruiting and retaining high-quality employees at the school level who provide direct services to keiki. ... This is egregious in behavior on all levels."

Randy Perreira, executive director of the Hawaii Government Employees Association, the union representing more than 6,800 DOE employees, including school administrators, support staff and special-services personnel, in six bargaining units, called the initial proposal "an insult to our members."

He added that low pay is a major reason Hawaii's public schools are short thousands of staff who work directly with students. For instance, of the roughly 3,600 positions statewide for educational assistants, about 1,235 are vacant, according to monthly reports provided by the state, Perreira said. Of 350 security attendant positions, 89 are vacant. "They are struggling to recruit," he said in an interview after the meeting.

He also decried what he said has been a slow response by the DOE to the union's requests to discuss pay adjustments for school-level workers. "It is unacceptable for us to be waiting for months to get a response to our requests for pay equity and our demands to bargain while the department decides it is more important to seek raises for their top leadership, many of whom have not even been on the job for a year," Perreira said in written testimony.

The Hawaii State Teachers Association declined to comment Thursday on the DOE's proposal. The union representing 3,700 public school teachers has said previously that it has launched negotiations with the DOE for a new contract.

Hayashi and his team had developed the proposal to increase the salary ranges for key DOE leaders after the school board at a Nov. 17 meeting directed the department to create a new system for determining complex- area superintendent salaries based on experience, performance and levels of responsibility.

In a [memo](#) to the board, Hayashi said the DOE in its research found that the median salary for associate superintendents of U.S. school districts with an enrollment of more than 100,000 students is \$180,975.

The department also reviewed salary schedules for principals of Hawaii public schools and found that many would be earning far more than the complex-area superintendents' base salary, Hayashi said. Currently, 19 Hawaii public school principals earn more than \$165,000, and in 2024 the tally will rise to 54, Hayashi said.

Not only would it be inappropriate to have principals earning more than their supervising complex-area superintendents, but "fair and competitive salaries are essential to attract and retain skilled executive leaders with leadership and managerial responsibilities to the statewide public education system," Hayashi said.

The proposal in its initial form would have raised pay for the state's top "subordinate superintendents" under Hayashi — Deputy Superintendents Heidi Armstrong, Curt Otaguro and Tammi Oyadomari-Chun, and seven assistant superintendents who head the DOE's various departments ranging from curriculum to facilities and operations — along with the 15 complex- area superintendents.

But several board members were upset that the scope of the proposal went beyond what the board asked for.

Board Chair Bruce Voss, a member of the board's Human Resource Committee, said during the committee's meeting that he supports the new pay range for complex- area superintendents, "but — and this is a big 'but' — the board didn't ask for increased range of compensation for the deputy superintendents and the assistant superintendents."

"And you saw the testimony, how that angered the people, the educational assistants, the speech pathologists, the school psychologists, the school health aides, the school security attendants, the people that work at the school, how that angered them. Why did the department propose something that the board didn't ask for?"

Hayashi responded, “It was our understanding that initially the request was for those three areas; in going back and looking at the minutes, we stand corrected.”

Voss called it a “a misstep, a serious misstep and an unnecessary misstep” that “puts a dark cloud” over the board’s efforts to convince state legislators to correct pay inequities for school employees. Voss added, “I hope you take the testimony, the written testimony that was submitted today, to heart. ... It took a lot of courage to come forward and put their names out and put their opinions out. They haven’t done this before.”

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