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Hawaii hurricane fund may be tapped to end teacher furloughs

Lawmakers pledge money from hurricane relief fund to halt school closures

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Hoping to prevent teacher furloughs next school year, state House and Senate negotiators agreed last night to devote \$67 million from the state's Hurricane Relief Fund if Gov. Linda Lingle and educators can finally reach a deal.

Lawmakers had promised additional state money to reduce teacher furloughs nearly six months ago, when the public backlash against furloughs first began, but last night took a concrete step.

The money, which still requires final approval by the full House and Senate, could be used to eliminate the three furlough days remaining this school year and the 17 furloughs that are scheduled next school year to help with the state's budget deficit.

The burden now shifts back to Lingle, the state Board of Education and the Hawaii State Teachers Association to decide whether to take advantage of the money and revise the two-year contract with teachers.

"I hope people realize that this is not an effort to say that we support the proposals by the union, by the department, by the board, by the governor, but we really are supporting the children of this state," said state Rep. Roy Takumi, D-36th (Pearl City, Momilani, Pacific Palisades).

"To say that here's some dollars to end the furloughs, and we are really pleading with the parties to get back together and come to a resolution so we can end the furloughs."

Marguerite Higa of the grassroots organization Save Our Schools said lawmakers should have acted on using the Hurricane Relief Fund sooner. Higa was one of four people who were arrested for trespassing last week as parents, students and supporters held an eight-day sit-in in Lingle's office at the state Capitol to protest the furlough days. The sit-in ended without the governor agreeing to meet with the group.

"We had hoped that they would head this off before it became a problem," Higa said of the Legislature. "It's disappointing that they are still basically bickering over details up to the very last minute."

Higa said SOS has not given up on the remaining three furlough days this year.

"We're going to keep asking why, why, why are we keeping our kids out of school?" she said. "We're not giving up on this year. It's the wrong message to send to the keiki of Hawai'i that education is something to give up on."

Wil Okabe, the president of the teachers union, said lawmakers were listening to the public. "Legislators represent the people, so I'm sure they have received calls from their constituents," he said. "It is a message to the governor that the people want this."

Lawmakers understand that they are just one part of the equation — and that the money in the Hurricane Relief Fund may never actually be tapped unless the governor and educators reach a deal — but many said they did not want to end session next week without showing their commitment.

Midnight deadline

Midnight was the deadline to have bills ready for final votes next week, and lawmakers put the last pieces in place to close the state's \$1.2 billion budget deficit and balance the six-year financial plan.

Lawmakers were still considering whether to scoop some of the roughly \$100 million in hotel-room tax revenue that goes to the counties each year. All four county mayors were at the Capitol to lobby against the proposal, arguing that it could lead to higher property taxes and cuts to county programs.

Lawmakers decided to divert \$23 million from the state's rainy day fund to help three dozen health and social-service programs, including money for Healthy Start, a child-abuse prevention program, and Kupuna Care, which helps the elderly receive care at home instead of going to nursing homes.

"I think they worked very hard to protect the health and human services sector," said Alex Santiago, the executive director of PHOCUSED, a public-policy group that advocates for social services.

Many parents and educators who have been involved in the effort to reduce teacher furloughs also appealed to lawmakers to ensure a minimum amount of classroom instruction for students. Teacher furloughs have dropped the number of instructional days to 163, the lowest in the nation.

Lawmakers agreed to a bill that would require 180 instructional days in the 2011-12 and 2012-13 school years, including a minimum 915 student instructional hours in elementary school and 990 instructional hours in high school.

The requirement would set the standard as student instructional hours rather than teacher minutes, as it is now.

The state Department of Education would have to maintain the 180 instructional days in the 2013-14 and 2014-15 school years, but student instructional hours would increase to 1,080 for all grades.

The department would also have to present a plan to the Legislature before the 2012 session on how to have a minimum of 190 instructional days — including 1,140 student instructional hours — by the 2015-16 school year.

"It ensures, for the children, that they will have a minimum amount of instructional time per day," said state Rep. Lyla Berg, D-18th (Kuli'ou'ou, Niu Valley, 'Āina Haina), one of the House negotiators. "It's very exciting."

Okabe said the union does not object to the plan as long as it is negotiated in collective bargaining and teachers get paid for their time.

"We're willing to work longer, as long as we're compensated," he said.

kindergarten shift

Negotiators also agreed to end the state's junior kindergarten program by the 2013-2014 school year and develop a transition plan to find high-quality preschool options for about 5,000 children under 5 who would have been involved in the program.

Hoping to attract a broader range of talent from across the country, lawmakers agreed to raise the salary cap for the state schools superintendent from \$150,000 a year to \$160,000 and offer performance bonuses that could over time increase the salary to \$250,000 annually.

Lawmakers also reached consensus on a bill that would implement a new appointed state school board if voters approve a state constitutional amendment on the November ballot.

The school board would be made up of 10 members, including one nonvoting student member. The members would be appointed by the governor, subject to the advice and consent of the Senate, from recommendations of a new selection advisory council.

The process would be similar to the appointment procedure for the University of Hawai'i Board of Regents.

Lawmakers also agreed to end a separate health care plan for teachers — known as a Voluntary Employees' Beneficiary Association — in December, six months later than scheduled but sooner than the teachers union preferred.

Teachers, who wanted to stay in VEBA would be folded into the same state health care umbrella as other state workers.
