ROBERT LANDAU

The new executive director of the Hawaii Association of Independent Schools brings an international perspective to his role as chief advocate for private schools in multicultural Hawaii

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Robert Landau has spent most of his long career working for private schools outside of the U.S., and now he's applying his wealth of multicultural experience to his new job as executive director of the Hawaii Association of Independent Schools.

Its 100 or so members range, he said, from "the largest, kind of well-known schools in Hawaii," such as Kamehameha Schools and Punahou, "and then you have the small, faith-based schools, and Montessori schools, Waldorf schools. … There's every shape and size."

Together the schools employ more than 3,100 teachers and serve more than 32,400 students — almost 17 percent of all students in the state, including about 24 percent on Oahu.

Taking over from the previous, longtime executive director, Robert Witt, and on the job since mid-July, Landau previously was the deputy superintendent of Singapore American School in Singapore. He also has taught or been a leader at schools in Switzerland, the Czech Republic, Indonesia, China and Cambodia, where he also set up the Cambodia's Future Foundation, to help students there attend college.

"I understand independent schools extremely well because international schools are independent schools," Landau said.

Back in the U.S. briefly for 10 months in 1998-1999, Landau also was founding director of the first charter school in America to offer an international curriculum, in Monterey, Calif.

His own education includes graduating from University High School in Los Angeles, then earning both a bachelor's degree in liberal studies and his teaching credential from San Francisco State University and a master's degree in education from Endicott College in Beverly, Mass.

He ended up spending decades outside America, he said, because, "When I got my teaching credential in California, it was at a time when there were very few teaching jobs. So I thought I'd go overseas for a year. … And a year turned into about 40 years."

Now 63, Landau is married and has two adult sons with his wife Kate, a British citizen he met at a softball game in Switzerland, and with whom he'll be living in Kaneohe. ucation, especially with the rise of online learning opportunities — Khan Academy and such — that reduce the need for brickand-mortar locations with large teaching and maintenance staffs?

You know, I am a futurist; that is one of my strengths. I've been doing this for a long time, and it's frustrating, because educational trends go one step forward, two steps back. … So now there's this belief that you can educate kids online for free.

Where I'm a traditionalist is in a couple of areas. One is that education is not just about teaching and learning; it's about mentoring and coaching, and there is nothing more powerful than a passionate, experienced teacher.

I do agree that the role of teachers needs to change. We use the two terms “sage on the stage” and “guide on the side.” So the idea when you and I went to school was we had the sage on the stage, the person who was very informed about their subject, and that’s what they devoted their time to — say, algebra. Whereas now we know, with 21st century skills, that when you’re looking at critical thinking and collaboration and character and creativity, you need somebody who can help students identify what are their strengths and their passions, and help them kind of galvanize those strengths and passions around what they’re going to do in the future.

That’s not standing up and teaching discrete subjects. That’s giving kids the ability and the opportunity to experience learning. You can’t do that online. You can learn algebra and history and you can write an essay and have somebody grade it, but, for me, the future of education is about experiential and project-based learning, where you need an environment to do that.

What is the interface with government in terms of requirements for private schools?

Well, you know, the thing about private schools in the United States is that that’s why they’re independent, so they don’t have to follow state norms.

But every independent school must have a mission and a curriculum, and their most important role is still to get their graduates into higher education.

So higher education often tells you what the norms are; you know, what kind of diploma they will accept, what kind of testing has to be completed. … You’ve heard of No Child Left Behind and statewide testing, and, of course, independent schools don’t have to follow those same guidelines, but they do pay very close attention to what the state and the nation are expecting.

Why do you think so many people in Hawaii send their kids to private schools, compared to the nation as a whole (about 17 percent versus about 11 percent)?

That’s a loaded question that will get me into trouble, if I answer that question from what you hear. … But to give you the diplomatic answer, people seek independent school education for their kids because of a particular desire to have that education over the public or charter (experience). …

Why do people choose independent schools and choose to pay thousands of dollars when public school education is free? It’s because they have the ability to make the choice.

But, I have to say, the majority of independent schools in Hawaii offer financial assistance. You have the Kamehameha Schools, of course, which has a very strong mission around the education of Hawaiian kids, and I believe, though I’m not 100 percent sure, that it’s a huge scholarship-driven institution.

Every school I know and have heard of so far, they want to make their schools accessible to families that might not be ableto afford a private school education.

Q: How do they do that? I mean, where does that money come from?
A: Usually schools create scholarship funds, and they do that through budgeting and fundraising. … Again, independent schools, a lot of their bottom line is not always covered by tuition. A lot of independent schools hire what are called development officers or development directors who look at opportunities or additional funding.

Q: Speaking of the cost of going to private schools, it seems that every year the tuitions go up. Is that just inflation, which affects everybody, unfortunately, or is there something else going on? Why does it seem to be so high and why does it keep going up?
A: Well, … I have been a school head for 25 years, listening to parents complain about the 3-1/2 percent tuition that they seem to have to pay additional every year, and the reality is that for a school, about 80 percent or more of what you do you can’t control. In some schools, between 70 and 75 percent-plus of their budgets is salaries and benefits, so when you’re advertising small class size and lots of activities for kids, you need people to do that. So at the end of the day, the only way to reduce the cost of school is to reduce the number of people you have working there, and that can sometimes then harm your product.
The other things you can’t escape are your insurance, your utilities, your taxes … you’re subject to the outside costs. … So how do you keep the cost of the school down? As a homeowner, you know that every year running your home costs you more money. So think of an independent school as a really big home with lots of kids living in it.

Q: What do you think about all the talk recently about early education?
A: Well, in the international world, there's an incredible early childhood philosophy that comes out of Italy called Reggio Emilia, and it's about giving young children this rich experience around learning and acquiring an understanding about the world around them in a natural way. So I'm a strong believer in needing a great start. … Kids shape their love of learning and their appreciation of being inquisitive and creative around their earliest experiences. So when you're putting a young child in a classroom and forcing them to read at the age of 2, you know, it's like, what's the hurry? Q: "What's the hurry"? A: Anybody can learn to read; it's decoding symbols. But if you don't know the meaning of what you're reading, it doesn't make sense.
So the first thing you have to do when you have young kids is you have to get them to make sense of themselves and the world around them. Then you acquire, as you start to decode these words, "Oh, I know what that is, I've been there." "Oh, I've done that." … It's a lot different than memorizing something. … When I was in Singapore, I saw the principal of our early childhood (program) … doing some training for Reggio Emilia. And she was out picking up twigs and leaves. "What are you doing?" "Oh, I have to have these for the workshop today. We're going to be doing stuff with twigs and leaves." That's a little bit different from, "Oh, I'm going to the library to get work books and reading books." … It's very cool.

Q: In a video on YouTube having to do with your career, I noticed you were playing the guitar a lot when appearing with various groups of students. What's the story behind that?
A: (Laughs) You know, as a school head, I do believe you need something that is going to connect you with kids, and the guitar has always been that for me. I mean, I can walk into a classroom of kids who don't even know who I am, sing this song that I do called "Apples and Bananas," and for the rest of the year the kids, they'll shout out from across the yard, "Hey, Mr. Apples and Bananas!" Even if they didn't remember my name.

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