

# 'Mystery shoppers' to check schools

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Coming this fall to a public school near you: A cheery greeting and a friendly smile at the door, helpful service over the phone, and an awareness that everyone who makes contact with a school deserves the best customer service possible.

The Department of Education expects to roll out its version of a "mystery shopper" program when school begins again in July, with the goal of changing any negative perceptions the DOE has garnered over the years, and improving service.

It's officially being called Project Aloha, and it expects to employ the whole retinue of tools used by private enterprise to keep employees on their toes to serve customers well and keep them coming back. These include unannounced evaluators, or "mystery shoppers," posing as parents, secret callers to schools and state and district offices, and a survey of all personnel beforehand to see where the institution is falling short now.

During the first month of the new school year, about 24 volunteer mystery shoppers will fan out throughout the school districts. No one will know the schedule, not even the unions.

"How do we change our image and the perception of the DOE?" asks deputy superintendent Clayton Fujie, who often is the one to field complaints.

"Look at it from the parents' shoes — be nice to people. But (DOE) people can get so stressed with the daily work that they forget."

"When you walk into a place like Hardware Hawaii, you feel good because someone is asking, 'Can I help you?' " said Fujie. "They're not there to hound you, they're there to help you."

The program will not involve or judge classroom teachers, but rather the hundreds of personnel from clerks and secretaries to district superintendents who deal with parents, students and other members of the public on a daily basis.

Susan Kondo, volunteer coordinator of the project based in the superintendent's office, said it's primarily aimed at creating self-awareness among employees about how to treat each person who walks in the door. Training will also be done throughout the department.

Already, she says, she's heard from one employee that she's scared about the program.

"Why?" Kondo asked. "Don't you treat people courteously?"

When the employee responded that they do, Kondo explained there's nothing to be afraid of. And employees who exemplify good service will be rewarded with certificates of recognition called Aloha Awards. Second, a Letter of Hope will be sent to help employees improve any weaknesses.

Reports will not affect employees' evaluations nor will they be used as disciplinary measures, or measures to fire people, said Fujie.

"We need to assess what we're really weak in," says Kondo. "We're trying to keep it positive. It's something to support them."

For many in the business world, the mystery shopper program is used similarly.

"We use it as an educational tool," says Lane Muraoka, who heads Big City Diner operations. "Whenever you deal with the public the customer service is the most important."

Muraoka said that he thinks the DOE will see results. "I think it will improve the services people are getting and customers are getting. All the banks employ this. Macy's and Longs, too."

Michelle Chun, mystery shopper division manager for Safeguard Services, which provides mystery shoppers for numerous retail clients, applauds the DOE.

"Why not?" she says. "They want to make sure their staff offers the service the public is paying for."

A mystery shopper who would not divulge her name, but works for Chun part time in the evening — and is a DOE teacher during the day — believes the idea has validity although it came as a surprise.

"I think it would be very good to see how the administration (of a school) deals with parental concerns," she said. "I would hope it would improve the response to parents if someone is there other than the parent, and with an objective point of view."

Hawai'i State Teachers Association president Roger Takabayashi believes the idea has merit.

"I don't know what the program is, but it sounds like they're trying to see how well people are served," he said. "If everyone is making a conscious effort, that's good. Any public agency should respond appropriately."

At the moment, said Kondo, "there's nothing in the schools to help people know what customer service is really about.

"The bottom line is we all need to treat others the way we want to be treated," she said. "So this is the plan to get the results we want."

Fujie and Kondo's presentation of the program to the Board of Education at its bi-monthly meeting yesterday brought encouragement and satisfaction from board members also. Board member Lei Ahu Isa called it "a great first step" and Paul Vierling called it "a good start."

"Thank you. ... It's been a long time coming," board member Karen Knudsen said. "This will be a culture change in the schools and will filter down. Just don't go overboard."

Board members cited such retail operations as Wal-Mart that have customer-friendly operations.

"They wear blue and red coats that say, 'Hello, may I help you,' " said Herbert Watanabe. "Maybe we should have a rubber stamp on our forehead."

The program is not something the DOE heard about from other school districts. Rather it's a home-grown effort to work more cooperatively with parents, including military parents from whom complaints often come. A number of military parents have volunteered to be mystery shoppers, said Kondo.

"We hope to really make our schools visitor-friendly," she added. "We're going back to basics ... so that when people say 'DOE,' they won't go. "Eeeoohhhh.' "

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