

Hopes high for state's new school construction authority

By **Esme M. Infante**

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Chad Keone Farias, the new head of the state's relatively new School Facilities Authority, has already heard the skepticism.

Among the questions lobbed his way: Will this independent authority really be more innovative and faster at building new public schools and teacher housing than the state Department of Education has been? Can such an untested agency do a good job with the \$200 million the Legislature just approved to finally start building universal preschools across Hawaii? Will the authority be accountable and transparent? How does Farias, a career educator, qualify to direct so much big-ticket construction?

Farias, a 29-year DOE educator appointed in March by Gov. David Ige as the first executive director of the School Facilities Authority, admits this is somewhat uncharted territory for him and the authority's five-member volunteer board. But some of that is by design: The point of the authority is to change the status quo, devising new ways to build education-related facilities quickly and cost-effectively.

For what Farias may lack in years of construction experience, he is striving to make up for with passion for what he calls "thinking outside the box ... but with guardrails" from the board, which includes some industry leaders, together with a belief in the urgency of improving public education for all, born of his decades of work with local keiki.

"There's so much potential here. I'm gonna run hard with this," the former DOE teacher, principal and complex area superintendent said with his signature effusive enthusiasm during a Honolulu Star-Advertiser interview Thursday.

Even though the agency is still so new that it has no support staff or a full website yet, and the budget with the \$200 million preschool facilities appropriation — part of the overall \$2.4 billion allotted this legislative session for public education — still hasn't been formally signed by Ige, Farias and the board are already working. He has been meeting with multiple agencies and stakeholders, studying tax map keys and compiling data to get a jump on the job ahead.

"I'm not waiting," he said. The three top priorities for now for the School Facilities Authority, according to Farias: >> Generate enough preschool space so that, in keeping with the 2020 Legislature's Act 46, all 3- and 4-year-olds can have access to early learning by 2032.

>> Build new schools for grades kindergarten through 12 in parts of the state where growth is high.

>> Create more affordable and desirable housing for teachers to enhance hiring and retention. Classrooms just a start

Many educators have argued for years that universal early learning should be an imperative and a right. But according to recent annual surveys by Kids Count, slightly less than half of Hawaii's children ages 3 and 4 typically have enrolled in some kind of private or public preschool, nursery school or kindergarten, while the rest have not.

Of the keiki who are enrolled, most are using paid private providers, said Cheri Nakamura, director of the nonprofit advocacy group HE'E Coalition.

Farias — who started as a Hilo High classroom teacher in 1993 and until recently was the Kau-Keaau-Pahoa Complex Area superintendent — shifts back into educator mode when he explains the crucial nature of accessible early learning for all.

"We know all the brain science around development, and how much happens before a child is 3, before a child is 5, before a child is 7 — and how it falls off (after those ages)," he said. "We know that language acquisition by 13-ish, especially if it's a second language, is three to four times as hard if you don't start it early. ... We know that we have to start education younger, not older."

The idea to create a system of early learning for all of Hawaii's prekindergartners has been perennially offered up by various state leaders since at least the 1990s, but the \$200 million approved this year by the Legislature is the state's first major appropriation to build the facilities for it.

Using the Legislature's rounded estimate of \$1 million to build a new preschool classroom or renovate an existing classroom, the \$200 million could build or refurbish facilities for around 200 classrooms.

But that would provide just a start. At 20 children per classroom, about 4,000 4-year-olds could be accommodated, together with the several hundred keiki in 36 preschool classrooms already operating on various DOE elementary campuses.

While that would be a dramatic improvement, Farias said, it would still cover only about one-third of the state's estimated 12,000 4-year-olds likely to use public preschools.

House Finance Chair Sylvia Luke said in a recent interview with the Star-Advertiser that building out preschool classrooms to serve about 20,000 children by 2032 would cost about \$2 billion by 2020 estimates, or another \$200 million for each of the next 10 years.

Workforce needs

Buildings alone do not a preschool system make, though. All those added classes would need trained, highly qualified staff, who will be a challenge to find given the ongoing teacher shortage, notes Yuuko Arikawa-Cross, executive director of the state Executive Office on Early Learning.

Arikawa-Cross also is new to her role, appointed just a few weeks ago, and her office has not yet assembled data for the existing and future early learning workforce. But she said by email that "a guesstimate, presuming all children would be served in a center-based program with no more than 20 students in a class with a teacher and aide, is that we would need 1,800-plus individuals."

That figure could rise, however, if many families choose family-based child care, which has a smaller adult-to-child ratio, she said.

Last year's Legislature authorized a stipend program to encourage University of Hawaii students to become early childhood educators.

Arikawa-Cross said the stipend funds are a gift from the Samuel N. and Mary Castle Foundation. But stipends haven't been offered yet because the memorandum of agreement with UH is still being finalized, she said.

"Making big change such as providing preschool access for 3- and 4-year-old keiki takes time," state Rep. Justin Woodson, chair of the House Committee on Education, said in his announcement about the preschool initiative. Hoping for transparency

Farias says the beauty of the School Facilities Authority arrangement is freedom to craft projects that solve multiple problems. For instance, he said, state Superintendent Keith Hayashi recently asked whether it might be possible for Waipahu High School to host a preschool classroom as part of a career academy that introduces high schoolers to working in education. That could be a model for high schools as a pipeline producing more teachers, Farias said.

Construction of new stand-alone schools also will be the authority's kuleana. High-growth areas that require more schools include Kapolei, which needs another high school and six elementary schools, and Maui, which needs an added elementary and middle school, he said.

The authority's ability to team up with other agencies could mean the rise of multiuse projects with "a commercial interest on the first level, DOE taking up the second to fourth level for education, and HHFDC (Hawaii Housing Finance and Development Corp.) taking the fifth through the 15th level for low-income housing, teacher housing, whatever it may be," Farias said. "That is the true test — when we as government can solve two or three issues at once."

But there are other tests, including accountability and transparency.

Lawmakers have said the authority should expedite school projects and generate revenue through public-private ventures. But questions remain about how the agency will operate, how it will avoid overlap with the DOE, and how school construction priorities will be determined.

The School Facilities Authority is intended to have freedom from some of the requirements that have bogged down facilities work by the DOE and state Department of Accounting and General Services. The authority is to handle just new construction, and the DOE responsible for repairs and maintenance. The authority is still under the DOE for administrative purposes, but Farias says it answers to the governor and not the state schools superintendent or Board of Education.

Nakamura says there are similar school facilities authorities in several other states. Hawaii's is so new that "it's not clear how everything is going to work, that's for sure," she said. When asked whether she thinks its workings will be transparent to the public, "That's what we would hope."

Farias says he is determined to keep openness and accountability in the process, with wide community discussions and strict adherence to sunshine laws. When asked what success will look like, Farias took a breath, then said, "Public trust and public confidence."

Tested under fire

Farias, a Hawaii island native, holds a bachelor's degree in history and education from Loyola Marymount University, and a master's degree in education administration from UH. But he believes a major reason he was asked to head the School Facilities Authority is work he once performed literally under fire.

When Kilauea volcano erupted in 2014 and sprouted a lava flow that threatened the Pahoa area, Farias helped direct the rapid reassignment of thousands of students and employees. He recalls coordinating with the Federal Emergency Management Agency, DOE and other agencies to erect a temporary school made of portables in Keeau High School's stadium parking lot for 400-plus students.

"Because I closed two schools, opened a school, built that school in 20 days during the lava flow, and shut it down eight months later, I think I have a lot of experience with what works and doesn't work," Farias says wryly.

He wants his six-year term to bring similar resourcefulness and a new era of school access for all.

"People say, 'No can, we tried that.' Well it's a different time," he said. "Let's try it again, with a 'can' attitude, with a 'how can' attitude. With an exclamation mark."

State School Facilities Authority Executive Director Chad Keone Farias, pictured at Prince Jonah Kuhio Elementary School, was a DOE educator for 29 years.

BOARD MEMBERS

The state School Facilities Authority is headed by Executive Director Chad Keone Farias and five unpaid volunteer board members. All are appointed by the governor. The members are: >> Board Chairperson Alan Oshima, retired president and CEO of Hawaiian Electric Co. >> Harold Edwards, president and CEO, ITC Water Management >> Bettina Mehnert, CEO, Architects Hawaii Ltd. >> LaJuaine "Candy" Suiso, retired teacher; founder, Searider Productions >> Lindsay Ball, interim member; retired complex area superintendent for Hana Lahainaluna-Lanai Molokai complex of the state Department of Education



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