

by Herman T. Guerrero, Chair  
Post Convention Committee

In yesterday's column I spelled out why the delegates have proposed Amendment #13. I emphasized that the delegates were very dissatisfied with the current state of public education in the Commonwealth, that parents and voters need more information and accountability in the school system, and that parents want more input into the actual operation of the schools that their children attend. How will Amendment #13 meet these needs?

### **More Parent Input at the Local Level**

Amendment #13 would substitute three local elected boards for the current Commonwealth-wide elected school board. This is a great stride towards real island self-government that people in the Northern Marianas have been seeking for years. Each of the three islands would be electing five members on a non-partisan basis to serve as board members. The basic thought here is simple: the people who reside on each island have a better understanding of what is needed for their schools than the members of a Commonwealth-wide board. A local school board will be listening to the parents, and serving as advocate for the needs of the schools on that particular island.

These local boards will have real power. They will be authorized to hire and fire principals. They will make decisions with respect to the upkeep and expansion of school facilities. They will provide a forum for airing the grievances of parents and PTA organizations. They will focus on methods for improving the quality of instruction, taking account of local conditions, and the incentives necessary to keep students in school until graduation.

Critics of Amendment #13 have questioned the relationship between these locally elected boards and the proposed Secretary of Education. It will be the Secretary's job to make educational policy for the Commonwealth, after receiving input from the local boards and others with views to contribute. Once the policies are established, the local boards will monitor the performance of local school principals to make certain that they comply with the policies.

### **More Information, Equity and Accountability**

Amendment #13 also addresses the need for more information and accountability. It would require the Legislature in its annual appropriations to divide the available funds into three categories; instructional, administration and capital improvements. With respect to the instructional funds, the annual appropriations would initially allocate funds to each school on a per enrolled student basis. This will give the parents and the local boards the information that they are now lacking and will begin to deal with the serious problem of unfair allocation of funds among the schools.

During the last several weeks it has been suggested that the students on Rota and Tinian will suffer under such a system. This is not true. In order to clarify the intentions of the delegates in proposing Amendment #13, the Post Convention Committee has revised the Analysis to the Constitution. As revised, the Analysis makes clear that the annual appropriation for instructional purposes based on per enrolled student can be supplemented as required if the necessary justification is provided the Legislature. Specifically, the revised Analysis states:

“ [The per student figure] is a base point or floor, so that parents understand the level of instruction to which each child in the Commonwealth is entitled and to which each school in the Commonwealth is entitled. If there are other, additional, or supplemental instructional needs in a school or group of schools, the legislature, in its judgment, may make appropriations for that purpose that are not divided on a per enrolled student basis if the legislature receives the necessary justification.”

The delegates believe that this proposed method for fixing instructional costs will bring more relevant information out in the open, allow parents and others to see exactly where the funds are going, and make it more difficult to use limited funds for levels of bureaucracy rather than for teachers and teaching materials.

### **Better Quality of Education**

No one can guarantee that Amendment #13 will improve the quality of education in the Commonwealth. But the delegates believe that the proposed changes in structure and funding are very important for providing an environment for doing so. Public education is one of the most important objectives of government in the Commonwealth. It is appropriate that the Governor and his appointed Secretary of Education be required to assume these weighty responsibilities under legislative oversight and to be held accountable by the parents and voters. Commonwealth citizens should not be afraid of “politics” in the educational system -- they should use “politics” to make certain that their children are receiving the very best education possible in the Northern Marianas.