

GUEST: GAIL AWAKUNI

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Aloha and welcome to *Long Story Short*. I'm Leslie Wilcox. Something remarkable is taking place in Ewa Beach, at James Campbell High School. Seven years ago, the school was known for gang and discipline problems. It posted some of the lowest test scores and highest drop-out rates in the state. Fewer than half its students were graduating. This year? The school says 99% of its seniors will earn diplomas. Test scores are way up. And Campbell High School is earning academic awards and accolades. What happened? We're about to meet a petite and powerful agent of change named Gail Awakuni.

A veteran public school teacher and DOE administrator, Gail Awakuni became principal at Campbell High School just before the school year began in 2000. Within four years, she'd been named State Principal of the Year and went on to top national honors.

Pat Hamamoto, Schools Superintendent (at Campbell High School, Sept. 24, 2004)

"I would like to announce that Dr. Awakuni is the Nat'l. High School Principal of the Year 2004. Her vision was to create a school in which students would be welcomed, students would be cared for and students would go out with the knowledge and skills that they would need to be successful. And Dr. Awakuni, your principal, started with a plan and she actually put all this to action."

She says no need to call her Doctor. Many of the students simply call her Miz. Gail Awakuni's plan and actions have led to tremendous changes in attitudes and achievement at Campbell High School. Ten years ago, the school says 10% of its students went on to college. Now, more than 70% do. Seven years ago, 30 students took College Board Advanced Placement exams. This year, nearly 400 will. Let's meet Gail Awakuni, the principal – and principal mover and shaker – of Campbell High School.

This is amazing, isn't it? It's like this explosion of success and achievement at Campbell in the last few years.

Few years; right.

Since you've been there. I need to explore this more with you. Because I know that there are lots of committed principals and other educators in our schools, and I know they're knowledgeable, and I know they make use of opportunities. But you've been able to marshal so many things together to make this happen. What is it about you? I don't think it's about me. It really is about the students and people at the school level who are willing to just put forth a lot of work and effort, and make the school better. And I think that's the rallying point that we have, you know, going for us, where you take a negative reputation, and you turn that into something positive. And that has been, you know, our mantra. So whenever we have a setback, then we just—Okay, let's move forward and move forward in how we're gonna fix this to make it better. And we're by no way a perfect school. You know, we have our share of problems, and we haven't we haven't fixed all of the problems in the community there, and I don't think we ever will. But we do try to take one child at a time and try to help each child, or try to better the situation for them.

So what's—

And we're still working at it.

What's the limit? Where does the gate on the achievement clang down?

I don't think it ever ends. I think it's a continuous, spiraling effect of continually trying to be better and improve. Once—I think like all civilizations, where they reach a point where they feel like they, they've reached it or, you know, have reached the point where they can just sit back and relax; and I think that's when civilizations crumble again.

So you see no limits?

So there's no limit. We just keep on moving forward, and keep on you know, improving what we're doing.

What's the toughest thing to change?

I think the toughest thing to change is changing mindsets and attitudes.

On the part of?

People.

Any person involved in the school?

Any person. I think that is the most difficult. Also, having people believe in themselves, and having confidence, developing the confidence to excel and to be the best that they can be. So everybody is their own worst enemy. Changing mindsets; that's the most difficult.

Changing mindsets.

Mindsets. But you know, it's possible when we see the successes. So everybody likes to see success and build on positive, positive results. And I think that's the key; to look at the results, and keep on climbing and keep on working at those results, to see that we can better ourselves.

For students in the academic middle, Principal Gail Awakuni spearheaded the AVID program – offering Advancement Via Individual Determination. She also established Small Learning Communities – academies within the school which educate students along the pathways of their chosen careers.

We all talk about metrics, in business. The metrics, the measurements, the quantification of education; there are a lot of really encouraging signs and transformations at Campbell High School. What are some of them?

Well, we use the data to actually start our work. Because was our assessment and to see where we're at, and how we're gonna go, and where. And every time we the reason why I measured the growth was to encourage and motivate everybody to keep on going. Because when they say success breeds success, that really is true. Because with our little successes, that is how we grew, and it got bigger and bigger. And each time we were pleasantly surprised.

What caused that? What happened?

School wide reform. We decided to focus on the ninth grade, and we contracted Johns Hopkins University to help us.

Where'd you get the money to do that?

We used our school money from our Federal funds, as well as the State funding, and we wrote grants. Lots of grants, those beginning years. So we did start off with a planning grant, which was a Federal grant. And it took us a year to plan and make our plan what we were gonna do. And then the second year was implementation; then we went out and we got a small learning community implementation grant. So those monies helped to quick start us. We also had donations from the community; James Campbell Estate, for example, was you know, very much behind of us. They gave us a check for \$150,000 to get started.

So you organized the school into small learning communities.

M-hm.

And what else?

And so we started the ninth grade, then we replicated the tenth grade academy. And the upperclassmen were the small learning communities into their electives. And we measured, and we watched the growth of our students. Also too, competitions help. So from the community there, as well as the Department of Education where there are State and National contests. Then we started preparing our students for these contests. And then when they started winning, that was an extremely strong motivator. For example, in 2004, when our math team won the statewide math bowl—

The first time a Leeward Oahu school had ever won the math bowl.

And also, first time for Campbell. And so that was you know, I think, one of the greatest incentives. It helped the students and the whole school to see, we can do it, and to forge forward, and each time they're seeking you know, greater success or do better. It's the measurement.

I want to know where this came from because clearly, there was your leadership at work. Where did you get this stuff?

How did you set this transformation in place?

Well, it's a lot of things going on, and I think we take a team of teachers as well as administrators to the mainland, where we go to national conferences, network with people. You know, outside of Hawaii.

So looking for ideas.

Looking for ideas, looking for research based models. Journals. Do a lot of reading.

'Cause you only want something that's proven.

Exactly. And then go on the internet and um, communicate through internet, find out more, and research these programs. We also do site visits. And so we visit schools and we see. And we go to schools of similar demographics as Campbell. And then we see how it's operationalized, and we get a lot of help from people who have done it. For example, our international baccalaureate; we visited many schools, and we had curriculum leaders who had been doing it for twenty years successfully. And so they shared their curriculum, as well as their program and studies, and everything with us.

The transformative efforts at Campbell High are paying off – literally – for students. Over the last seven years, graduating seniors have brought in more and more scholarship money to fulfill dreams of college. Last year, scholarships amounted to \$7.5 million. The school is introducing innovative programs like the International Baccalaureate Diploma. It's an elite, college-prep program with an international focus. It's designed to help students compete in a global society. And Gail Awakuni has every reason to be proud.

This is, you know, an accomplishment for us, because it's your highest level of rigor. And so the teachers had to work really hard. And you have their lessons that are approved, as well as they're given feedback from an international board. So when you look at standards and global education, it's not limited to just Hawaii or not just, you know, the Department of Education in Hawaii. Whereas it's international. And education is global today. So for the teachers to see what's out there, as well as for our students; and we say, you know, there's life beyond Renton Road, there's life beyond Ewa Beach, there's life beyond Hawaii, as well as even the United States now. They're saying that you know, it's international.

So you've raised the expectations for students and faculty.

And that's really the bar. And so what it's done was for the teachers to receive training as well as input, and feedback into the curriculum; then we backward map with the underclassmen and the other subject teachers, and everything else becomes aligned. So that now leads the staff development in the school, because they know what is the goal that they're really trying to obtain, which is an international goal.

Okay, now; there's something you're leaving out here. Just implementing new programs doesn't cause a rejuvenation, and it doesn't get people excited. What else have you done?

I think for basically for the teachers, it's you have to show them and prove to them that it can be done. So gradually, when we had the successes of our students, then more and more people get folded into and they want to be part of the excitement and the learning. For example, our incredible college and career counselor, as well as the setup that we have at our school with the aides and the helpers that she had too, each year, the scholarship amount doubled or tripled. It's the first year, we had a goal of \$1 million. And then we thought this was crazy; you know, that it would never happen. Because prior to that, we had scholarships of about \$600,000. But each year, you know, they went out and they competed, and they—last year, the scholarship amount was \$7.5 million.

So first, your staff competed to get scholarship money, and then your students—

The students—

--amped it up to get the scholarships.

Preparing the students for the scholarships as well as—there you go; competition, what's out there. And so, looking and seeing what was needed. And then it was basically looking at the coursework, as well as the colleges now; what is it that students will need to be globally competitive.

So some of these students, they've never had anybody in their family go to college.

Right.

They don't really know that they can succeed. But they are believers now that they can?

Absolutely. And we have a lot of first generation students going to college. And I think that's you know, really the excitement that we see. And we have graduates coming back and telling us that—they'll tell the parents that they're earning more than their parents. That's exciting.

And the parents like that to an extent, right?

The parents are you know, surprised too that they've done so well. And we're very proud; very proud that they've done so well and gone on you know, to be successful.

So, great feeling of pride from your students.

So great feeling of pride. And they did want to, you know, turn the school around and help the—to them, it was we reached out into the community. So pride in the community, pride for themselves as the school.

How did you reach out into the community?

We had a Kellogg's grant, and we reached out into the community by forming a nucleus committee, and we branched out and interviewed people in the community, asking them and getting feedback. What is it that you expected and wanted of the school? And so we had lists and lists of things that we grouped them. And that did not vary from what we had interviewed our teachers, as well as the support staff at our school. And so after we gathered that data, then we put it together, and then we made our plans and programs.

So you found that everybody really wanted the same thing.

Exactly. And so really, through the Kellogg's grant and the National Network of Educational Renewal, through University of Washington, that helped us formalize—the mantra was, you know, the responsibility for education is everybody.

Team-oriented, results-oriented and positive. What motivates Gail Awakuni? Where do her ideas come from? Where did she come from?

You're a product of the public schools?

Yes, I am. I'm a proud graduate of Kalani High School. I always tell the students that I'm from east side of Honolulu, and now I'm on the west side of Oahu.

Do they say they can't relate to you 'cause you're an eastsider?

They call me a townie. Everybody teases me, and they call me a townie. But I said, Well, the way that Ewa is developing, that's gonna be the future town of Oahu.

True. Well, what was your public school experience?

Well, I think that, as I recollect, and I compare past to now, I know that the public school is doing far more than what I've experienced. But it was always a very positive experience for me. I attended Kahala Elementary, then Kaimuki Intermediate, then Kalani, and UH system. So it's been public education all the way.

And you never felt, Oh, gee, other folks have the chance to go to private school, but not me, I gotta go public?

Well, for us, it was not even a choice, because my parents couldn't afford it, and they made it real clear that you know, they couldn't afford it. So we just had to make the best of whatever we had. But I never felt.

But did you feel you were losing something?

No, I never felt that I was being shortchanged or anything. I still remember my teachers; they were you know, extremely caring. And I learned.

Although inspired by her teachers, Gail Awakuni didn't plan on becoming one – until after she had finished college and started a family.

My mother told me to go into teaching. And of course, you know, being in college, I said, No, I'm not gonna listen to her, and then I majored in arts and science, and then it was, now what are you gonna do with this job. Because it's either nursing or teaching. So I went back to school for teaching,

You not only went to school; you got a PhD.

Well, that just happened along the way. And it was just a matter of my daughter was going through chemotherapy; she was a leukemia patient at that time. So my friend had told me, I've got a wonderful program, just for you, to help you through this. And at that time, I got interested in public health. But at the same time, when I saw the impact of education with children, as well as families, where really, education is the key to even good health.

To even good health?

Good health. And so that's when I felt that I needed to get back into teaching, and spread the word in that sense, where education really is the key to life.

So the hospital could have been aha moment for you to go into nursing, but instead, it sent you right back into education.

In teaching, you see hope and joy. And I think the hospital does that also. But at the same time, you see a lot of people go there when they have illness. Whereas in teaching, you see children, and you see bright smiles every day. And that's what I felt. You know, I needed to be there, where I like to see bright smiles every day, and help people have hope and dreams, and be a part of creating that dream for them.

Did your daughter recover from leukemia?

My daughter recovered; she's a leukemia survivor. And she's planning to go into nursing today.

Oh, that's interesting.

I had some great, great moments as a teacher. And when I moved into administration, I felt that here would be a way that I probably could impact more, and really do what I felt that we could help more students. And it goes back to what I had felt at the hospital; that it's bringing access to people, and opening more doors, because really, education is the key. Being able to read and write, compute, think, ask questions, you know, those were key. And again, it's how to reach a larger group of individuals, so that they—we always tell parents, you know, Education here, this is your life. And what we want for you and your child would be the best opportunity, so that you go out and have a good quality of life. And really, we're here to help and to do.

Gotta ask you a question that you might not like. You're a graduate of the public school system. You have been employed by the public system. And yet, you chose to send a couple of your children to private school.

M-hm. I think I've sent two to private and one went through the public school system. And I would say that, you know, I've learned from sending them to private school, as well as I think that I've brought some of those ideas with me, to the public sector, so that we can make our school just as good as a private school. 'Cause I believe that access, you know, that everybody should have access. And I'd like to make Campbell, you know, just as good as a private school, so that parents will have a choice. And those who can't afford a private education can have just as good an education at Campbell High School or in a public school. And I think, you know, it's a lot of guidance from home that is necessary, and again, looking at the needs of the individual and finding the best fit.

You've seen some of the private schools, you've seen the public schools. You really think you can even things out?

I think we can. And that's what we're trying to do at Campbell. It's really networking, and taking that and trying to make things, you know, better. And even when we were interviewed at Campbell with the international baccalaureate committee, you know, the question was, Why Campbell? And Superintendent Hamamoto said, Why not Campbell? You know, and that's what it is; why not? And so we could have just as much, and do just as well as any private school.

Indeed. Why not? Here at PBS Hawaii, we get to share stories of discovery and diversity, of local, community interest. Like this one – of Campbell High School's growing culture of high expectations and achievement. Mahalo to Gail Awakuni, and to you, for joining me for another Long Story Short. I'm Leslie Wilcox. Until next week, a hui hou kakou!

Pat Hamamoto / Schools Superintendent (at Campbell High School, Sept. 24, 2004)

"Dr. Awakuni has brought recognition to the school through you. So you helped her realize her vision. And you are her vision. In addition to that, this past year, Dr. Awakuni also received the Tokioka Award for outstanding school principal. When they asked her, What are you going to do if we give you \$15,000? Her answer was, she would give it to the school to start the AVID Program. So whatever she gets it goes back to the school. So your principal has been not only a person with vision, but she's also a person who made that vision come alive. And she made that vision a reality."