

# Educational Policy in the Post-racial Era: Federal Influence on Local Educational Policy in Hawaii

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Article abstract

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# *Educational Policy in the Post-racial Era: Federal Influence on Local Educational Policy in Hawaii*

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## **Introduction**

During Barack Obama's presidential campaign, journalists and other commentators often speculated on what Obama's presidency would mean for race relations in America. Among the ideas circulated at the time was the claim that if Obama was eventually elected president of the United States, this would somehow reveal that America had entered a new era with regard to the issue of race and racial inequality; namely, a "post-racial" era.

This reaction to Obama's campaign got me wondering how, if at all, the election of the first biracial president might impact Hawaii and the way education is run in that state. In this paper, I begin by looking briefly at the background and meaning of the term "post-racial" as it has been applied to Barack Obama's presidency. Then I use this as a way of contextualizing a critique of the Obama administration's current educational initiatives and the impact such initiatives may have on local educational policy in Hawaii. In the end, the larger challenge of this paper is to draw some meaningful linkages between race and current education policy trends.

## Post-Racial

On March 27, 2008, Newsweek ran an article titled, “Obama’s Postracial Test: How will the Democratic Candidate Deal with Potentially Divisive Ballot Initiatives Calling for an End to Affirmative Action?” And, the August 6, 2008 issue of the New York Times Magazine featured an article titled, “Is Obama the End of Black Politics?” Since then, writers from the right and left have vigorously considered whether the election of Barack Obama somehow signals a new, post-racial era and presidency.

For example, in March 2009, Leonard Pitts, columnist for the Miami Herald, wrote a commentary titled, “Post-racial America isn’t here yet.” In it he referred to the research of Richard Eibach who is a professor of psychology at Yale University. Eibach’s study shows that white American survey respondents report greater progress towards racial equality than that reported by black American respondents. Part of the reason for this, Eibach argues, is that white and black Americans use different reference points when judging racial progress (Eibach & Keegan, 2006). Where white Americans tend to judge progress by looking at how things were, Black Americans tend to judge progress by looking at how things should be.

Leonard Pitts borrows Eibach’s research to argue that black Americans see the goal of a post-racial America as an urgent necessity not yet achieved. Conversely, he argues, white Americans regard it as an ideal that might be nice to achieve someday. And, while white Americans’ see the election of a black president as proof that widespread racism against blacks no longer exists, black Americans’ see this merely as one big step in the right direction toward reducing racial inequality.

Differently, in June 2008, Thomas Sowell of the Hoover Institute wrote a piece with a title that asked the question, “A Post-racial President?” In it, Sowell argues that Barack Obama is far from a post-racial figure. Rather, says Sowell, Obama is more of the same; that is, he has a history of aligning with a group of individuals and organizations that “benefit greatly from crying racism” (Sowell, 2008). Among other things, Sowell points to Obama’s history as a community organizer and to his association with Reverend Jeremiah Wright as proof that Obama was never a post-racial figure. And, Sowell says that Obama’s actions in office, such as his appointment of Eric Holder as Attorney General, and his comments regarding the arrest of Henry Louis Gates, have born this out.

In July 2008, author Jeff Yang put a new spin on the post-racial question by suggesting that Obama, despite his African and European heritage, could be our first Asian American President. In explaining this, Yang refers to a famous New Yorker Magazine essay written by Toni Morrison. In it, Morrison suggests that Bill Clinton, despite his skin color, was our first black president because he “displays almost every trope of blackness” (Morrison, 1998). Borrowing this approach, Yang makes a close reading of Obama’s memoir, “Dreams from My Father,” and from this suggests that Barack Obama seems surprisingly embedded in the Asian community. For example, Obama was born and raised in Hawaii, the state with the highest percentage of Asian Americans. He has an Asian stepfather and an Asian American sister and Asian American brother in law. His senate chief of staff was Asian American as was his legislative director, and so on. Yang ends by suggesting that Obama’s diverse heritage invites those around him to “project on him a full spectrum of hopes and dreams” (Yang, 2008), regardless of their own racial background.

Despite the fact that the term “post-racial” has been used so often and by so many recently, there is no consensus on its meaning. However, for the purposes of this paper it seems helpful to distinguish two different, yet related, ideas captured by the term “post-racial.” The first idea is reflected in the phrase, “getting past race.” From this perspective, the claim that America is now “post-racial” suggests that race is no longer an important or legitimate way to prejudge groups or individuals in our country. Perhaps, from this perspective, America achieves a post-racial status when race no longer captures universally shared lived experiences in a meaningful manner. In such a society racism and inequity may still exist on a small scale, but because a significant number of individuals of every racial background have managed to become, let’s say, members of the ruling elite, the practice of prejudging,

classifying and stereotyping other individuals according to their racial status is difficult and inaccurate.

The second idea can be captured by the phrase, “getting past racism.” From this perspective, the claim that America is now “post-racial,” refers to the idea that racial discrimination is a problem of the past. That is to say that in America, racism no longer exists. Perhaps, under this meaning, society achieves a post-racial status when it has eliminated any and all vestiges of individualized and systemic racial inequality.

Both of these basic meanings have been intertwined in recent public debate. For example, U.S. Congressman Artur Davis is quoted as saying,

If Obama is president, it will no longer be tenable to go to the white community and say you’ve been victimized ... And I understand the poverty and the condition of black America and the 39 percent unemployment rate in some communities. I understand that. But if you go out to the country and say you’ve been victimized by the white community, while Barack Obama and Michelle and their kids are living in the White House, you will be shut off from having any influence. (Bai, 2008).

In this short statement, Davis alludes to the “getting past race” idea when he talks about how difficult it will be to “say you’ve been victimized by the white community” when people see Obama’s family living in the White House. In other words, this picture of the new First Family will make it that much more difficult to classify and stereotype African Americans as victims of discrimination, even though racism and racial inequity still exist throughout the country.

And, I argue that Davis simultaneously alludes to the “getting past racism” idea when he suggests that another result of this powerful picture of the new First Family will be that anyone complaining about racial discrimination will be “shut off from having any influence.” In other words, the reason complaints of racial discrimination will no longer be influential is because this high profile example of a man and woman of African decent rising to the highest levels of American society will lead most Americans to begin to think that the country has moved beyond the problem of racism.

If, as I argue above, the term post-racial seems to hold at least two distinct meanings, it is on the second meaning, “getting past racism,” that most critics have focused. One recent academic paper that follows this trend, is titled, “Post Racial Racism: Crime Control and Racial Stratification In the Age Obama.” Here, University of California Berkeley law professor Ian Haney-Lopez argues that a theory of racial stratification suggests some pessimism that the election of Barack Obama signals the end of racism in America. Without denigrating the potential for change that could follow in the wake of President Obama’s election, Haney-Lopez argues that a theory of racial stratification “emphasizes how deeply race structures our society” (Haney-Lopez, 2008, p. 58). He goes on to say that, “[r]ace forms a basis for the exploitation and hoarding of material, political, and cultural resources; in turn, the same processes that facilitate racial stratification continually reconstitute race.” The important idea to grasp here is that seeing race as a form of social stratification helps to emphasize the simultaneousness of racial categorization and the strategic misallocation of resources. Put differently, the point is that race is more than phenotype. That is to say that the meaning of race in America is intimately intertwined with accepted and standard processes used to misallocate wealth and power and status. This is what Douglas Massey (2007) called “categorical inequality.” And, categorical inequality is complicated and structurally entrenched and not likely to fade away with the mere election of Barack Obama.

I am with Haney-Lopez and Massey in that it seems clear to me that race structures our society, and that at the same time this structuring process fundamentally reinforces the meaning and significance of race and, therefore, racism. The upshot, I argue, is that America will not achieve what might meaningfully be thought of as a post-racial status, without real and widespread changes in the way that wealth, power and status are distributed among all of its citizens. Put differently, if at its foundation, the post-racial idea has to do with an adjustment in the fundamental meaning and significance of race and racism in America, I argue that any adjustment along these lines will come only

with the simultaneous adjustment of the structure of racial inequality that still exists in American society. Therefore, while I recognize the power and importance of the election of Barack Obama, it seems clear to me that this fact alone does not signal a new post-racial era, because it does not fundamentally alter the way race is used to structure our society and the way our social structure reconstitutes race.

### **Race to the Top Fund**

While the election of a biracial president may not go so far as to signal a new post-racial era for America, on a smaller scale, it could signal new momentum for a variety of policies designed to address the problem of widespread racial inequality. In this section, I focus on the Race to the Top Fund (RTTTF); a recent and highly touted education policy that the Obama administration has suggested is designed to address the issue of equity in education. When speaking about the RTTTF, U.S. Department of Education spokesperson Justin Hamilton said, “The administration is dedicated to equity in education and we've been working very closely with the civil rights community to develop the most effective policies to close the achievement gap, turn around low performing schools and put a good teacher in every classroom,” (Armario & Turner, 2010).

President Obama and U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan announced the RTTTF grant application on July 24<sup>th</sup>, 2009. The grant is specifically focused on what the administration calls comprehensive school reform, and is open only to states. The winners of this competition would be eligible to draw from the 4.35 billion dollars available in the RTTTF. Before March 29<sup>th</sup> 2010, when Secretary Duncan announced who won the competition, the administration never indicated how many grant winners there would be or how much money each winner would receive. We now know that Delaware and Tennessee were the winners, and that Delaware was awarded 100 million dollars and Tennessee was awarded 500 million. Both awards are to be spent over a four year time period. But, the process is not yet over. The administration has also announced that there will be a second round to the competition, and that states that did not win in the first round are eligible to compete in the second. Proposals for the second round were due on June 1<sup>st</sup> 2010.

To date, the RTTTF is the largest federal investment ever made in American education reform. The four priorities being promoted by the grant are: 1) improve standards and assessment, 2) build data systems 3) improve teacher and principal quality, and 4) improve lowest performing schools. The last priority, perhaps more obviously than the others, represents the Obama administration’s commitment to addressing the problem of educational inequality.

In addition to a focus on the above four priorities, the RTTTF introduced a clever twist to the traditional federal spending policy approach. Unlike most federal grants, the Race to the Top process includes a competitive element that encouraged states to work diligently to show capacity for accomplishing the four RTTTF priorities, *before* they will be considered eligible to submit an application. Effectively, this means that states applying for this grant are required to either put in place (or, at the least be able to show strong capacity for meeting) all four federal priorities, regardless of whether they actually win an award or not. The upshot of this clever twist is, of course, that for states like Colorado and Hawaii—both applied, but neither won a first round RTTTF award—the “federal priorities train” has already “left the station.” And, education officials in those states will continue down this track in the hope of winning a second round award, but whether they win that or not matters little in terms of policy direction, for the direction was set before they even submitted the first grant application.

When making the official announcement for the Race to the Top Fund, President Obama repeatedly referred the problem of educational inequality, saying at one point, that government must stop talking and start doing something about the fact that “African American, Latino students are lagging behind white classmates in one subject after another” (Obama, 2009). Toward the end of the announcement, the President recounted a school visit he made in Chicago when he was a community

organizer. He describes seeing kids full of energy and with hope in their eyes, who told him that when they grew up they wanted to be doctors and lawyers. Then, Obama says, the principal told him that would all change in a year or two when “they began to realize that their hopes wouldn’t come to pass ... because they didn’t see a pathway to success” (Obama, 2009). He ends by saying that he and Secretary Duncan are here “to make sure that we are giving all of those children, all of our children, the pathways they need to make the most of their abilities; to make the most of their opportunities; to make the most of their lives” (Obama, 2009).

There has been some recent criticism by civil rights leaders that the RTTTF might not be good for all minority students because it is a competitive grant that will ultimately only fund some states and potentially leave out others like California, Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas which have large communities of color (Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights under Law, 2010). Nonetheless, Secretary Duncan himself has been widely quoted as saying that education is “the civil rights issue of our generation” (Armario & Turner, 2010), and it is clear that he and President Obama view this policy as a straightforward effort to address the issue of educational inequality in America.

### **From National to Local**

At this point, I shift my analysis from a national perspective to a local one. In doing so, I will look at how the RTTTF policy impacts educational inequality in Hawaii. Here, I should be clear that my project is not to explain how race shapes local school reform and the politics that surround it. While I am familiar with work of Jeffrey Henig and others who argue that “race helps to explain the nature of local school-reform politics” and who also caution that race “does not serve as an explanation on its own terms,” (Henig, Hula, Orr, and Pedescleaux, 1999), my work here differs in that it is focused on examining how a specific federal policy that has a clear focus on addressing educational inequality, goes about serving this focus in a place like Hawaii.

And, because I will argue below that in Hawaii (like the rest of the nation) race is intimately linked with the distribution of educational resources, I will continue to rely on the theoretical lens of racial stratification theory. However, I will need to make a slight adjustment in the language I use when analyzing inequality in Hawaii. Instead of relying solely on the term “race” during this part of my analysis, I will also include the term “ethnicity.” Having said this, I want to note that I recognize the potential for confusion when using the terms “post-racial,” “race,” and “ethnicity” all in the same analysis, and I hope to offset this potential confusion with the following comments.

First, while generally speaking, race refers to phenotype, and ethnicity refers to a combination of phenotype and culture, there remains much scholarly debate and disagreement over the exact meaning and significance of these terms (Omi & Winant, 1994). Engaging in a complete analysis of this debate goes beyond the scope of this paper and, I argue, is not of critical importance to the larger point I want to make in the following sections, which is that in Hawaii certain children who fall into specific ethnic groups do not receive the same kinds of educational opportunities available to other children, and that current federal policy does little to relieve this problem.

Secondly, when analyzing educational inequality in Hawaii it is simply easier to rely, for the most part, on ethnic categories, rather than racial categories. After all, the Hawaii state department of education categorizes public school data by ethnic group (Office of the Superintendent/Planning and Evaluation Office, 2004, p. 10). The reason for this is that in Hawaii “ethnicity is the primary structural principle of social relations” (Okamura, 2008, p. 6). For example, Puerto Ricans, Samoans, Whites, and Japanese Americans are traditionally socially constructed as ethnic groups in Hawaii. Following suit, I will refer to ethnic categories throughout my analysis of educational inequality in Hawaii.

### Is Hawaii the Post-Racial Primordial Pond?

Before speaking specifically about education in Hawaii, I want to return briefly to the post-racial idea. Earlier, I argued that President Obama's election alone, without an accompanying change in the way race is used to structure society, does not signal a new post-racial status for America. If this is true, we might ask if there are places in the country that are indeed making such accompanying adjustments.

One might argue that Hawaii is such a place. After all, journalists, scholars and political figures have long touted the idea that Hawaii is unique in its achievement of harmonious race relations (Adams, 1936). And, emerging research on multi-ethnicity has focused on Hawaii because of the high number of children and adults in the state who identify with more than one racial and/or ethnic background (Kolonel, Henderson, Hankin, Nomura, Wilkins, Pike, Stram, Monroe, Earle, and Nagamine, 2000). This reflects the fact that Hawaii has by far the highest interracial marriage rate in the country and the highest percentage of non-white citizens (Okamura, 2008). Given its unique makeup, one might look to Hawaii as the state most capable of representing a new post-racial America. Put differently, if there ever were a place where one might look for the post-racial "primordial pond," Hawaii is probably as good a candidate as you might find.

However, upon closer examination some problems begin to emerge with this line of thinking. Clearly, when broken down by ethnic category, Japanese Americans, Chinese Americans and White people consistently generate the highest levels of family and individual income in Hawaii, while people of Samoan ancestry consistently generate the lowest levels of family and individual income (Okamura, 2008, p. 51). And, while income is only one of several key indicators of socioeconomic status, it seems problematic to position Hawaii as a new kind of post-racial state—that is, as having fundamentally adjusted the meaning and significance of race and racism—when it still deals with the problem of persistent economic inequality between ethnic groups.

In addition to income, University of Hawaii Professor Jonathan Okamura cautions against the common practice of offering Hawaii's high rate of interracial marriage as evidence of a tradition of non-discrimination and racial harmony (Okamura, 2008, p. 8). He writes, "[h]igh rates of interracial marriage may indicate an ethnically tolerant society but not necessarily a harmonious or egalitarian one" (Okamura, 1998, p. 269). The point is that in Hawaii people of different racial backgrounds simply grow up tolerating and interacting with one another. As a result, individuals from different racial backgrounds are bound to meet, fall in love and get married. However, it does not follow, Okamura argues, that they did so *because* Hawaii has a tradition of non-discrimination. And, in fact, there is evidence that even as interracial marriage rates have increased in Hawaii over the last twenty-five years, levels of racial inequality and discrimination have stayed the same or gotten worse, not better (Okamura, 2008).

So diversity and ethnic tolerance, alone, have simply not lead to the kind of real and widespread adjustments in the standard processes use to allocate wealth, power and status among all citizens that one would like to see before designating Hawaii as an emerging post-racial state. Put differently, I argue that Hawaii, while wonderfully diverse and uniquely tolerant, is not yet the site of the primordial, post-racial pond. In order to become this, Hawaii's citizens need to somehow combine the energy and excitement of the election of Barack Obama with the state's unique level of diversity and racial tolerance, and then use this in such a way as to fundamentally change the current structure of racial inequality that exists throughout the state. But how can Hawaii do this?

## RTTTF in Hawaii and Educational Inequality

Perhaps one way to make meaningful progress toward fundamental structural change with respect to racial inequality in Hawaii is to reduce the state's worrisome level of educational inequality.<sup>1</sup> For example, the majority of white students in the state of Hawaii attend either military serving public schools that receive supplemental federal funding, or they attend elite private schools like Punahou (the same school that Barack Obama attended) (Okamura, 2008). The educational resources available to children in those schools dwarf those received by children in regular public schools across the state. At the same time that a majority of white children attend the above mentioned institutions, a vast majority of students of Hawaiian, Samoan, Filipino, and Micronesian ancestry attend regular public schools (Office of the Superintendent/Planning and Evaluations Office, 2004). In other words, education in Hawaii is fraught with ethnic segregation and inequality.

To make matters worse, Hawaii's public school children and their parents are deeply disenfranchised and as a result their educational interests are not well protected by policy makers. For example, in response to state budgetary concerns last year, the state of Hawaii implemented a furlough plan which included locking public school children out of school for one day a week for 34 weeks during the 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 school years. While other avenues for cost saving and revenue earning were not pursued, the state implemented a furlough plan that was far more drastic than every other plan in the country (Roig, 2009). Even more telling is that the Governor, the State Department of Education, the elected School Board and the Teacher's Union all agreed that the 34 furlough days would be taken *during instructional days* within the regular school week. The upshot is that Hawaii's public school children would receive a drastically reduced academic calendar for two years (163 school days as opposed to 180 for most other school districts in the nation). Secretary Duncan found this move so troubling that he publically criticized it in a commentary titled, "Hawaii Erred in Cutting Education" that was published in the Honolulu Advertiser shortly after the announcement of the furlough plan (Duncan, 2009).

Given the state level context described above, it is not hard to understand why the Obama administration decided to address educational inequality through a federal educational policy initiative. If state policymakers and education leaders are unwilling or unable to address the problem of widespread educational inequality, perhaps federal policymakers can step in to fill the void. While it is not clear that Hawaii's education leaders want federal policymakers to help them with the issue of educational inequality, what is clear is that the Hawaii state department of education (DOE) continues to work furiously to meet the four RTTTF priorities mentioned above. Immediately upon learning that Hawaii was not one of the states to win an RTTTF grant during the first round, nor was Hawaii even one of the 16 finalists to be considered, DOE Interim Superintendent Kathryn Matayoshi released a statement saying, "[t]he department is moving forward with its reform initiatives to improve classroom instruction, develop a longitudinal data system, support struggling schools, and strengthen policies and practices that will result in more effective teachers and school leaders" (Matayoshi, 2010). Note that this statement highlights each of the four RTTTF priorities. So, as I argued above, it makes no difference whether Hawaii gets RTTTF funding or not, Hawaii is now committed to the four RTTTF priorities and will continue to be so for the foreseeable future.

So as Hawaii implements programs and policies aimed at meeting the four RTTTF priorities, for our purposes the question is will these efforts address the problem of educational inequality? There are at least two reasons, I argue, that the answer is no. First, as I mentioned above, the most direct way in which the RTTTF seeks to address educational inequality is by encouraging public school districts to

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<sup>1</sup> In chapter six of his book, *School Choice and Social Justice*, Harry Brighouse argues that "educational inequality due to family background circumstances or family choices are unacceptable." While I want to note that I am sympathetic to his argument, a full treatment of the philosophical concept of educational inequality is beyond the scope of this paper.



focus intensively on improving their lowest performing schools (this, you will remember, is the fourth priority). However, as I have argued above, Hawaii's educational inequality problem is fundamentally linked to the fact that the state has an extremely high percentage of students in elite private schools. And, because of this fact, a policy designed to meaningfully address educational inequality in Hawaii must, I argue, include under its purview private schools, as well as public schools. Ultimately, if when applied to Hawaii, the RTTTF does not work to measure performance across the public school/private school spectrum, it will fail to meaningfully capture the actual level of educational disparity in the state. Put differently, because the RTTTF does not currently include an assessment of the performance of private schools it is unable to make a complete and accurate assessment of which schools in Hawaii are the lowest performing and, especially, of what it means to "improve" Hawaii's lowest performing schools once they are identified. In other words, the calculation used to establish what it means to improve the lowest performing schools must include all (or at least the vast majority) of the schools attended by Hawaii's children, rather than just two thirds of the schools they attend. After all, determining whether Hawaii has met the fourth priority and has actually addressed educational inequality through improving the performance of its lowest performing schools, will depend partly on how these schools stand in relation to all of the other schools in the state.

Secondly, I argue that even if the RTTTF manages to capture an accurate picture of educational inequality in Hawaii and seeks to address this problem through a plan to improve Hawaii's lowest performing schools, at least one of the other RTTTF priorities is counter productive to this task. When examined closely, the priority focused on building data systems (the second priority) begins to look worrisomely like a call for ramping up supervision over teachers. Put differently, it seems to introduce a new way of controlling how public educators teach. For example, consider that this priority requires electronic data systems that both match specific student performance to specific teachers, and requires that the system be able to explicitly "inform teachers and principals about how they can improve instruction" (Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2010). It is problematic enough that one goal of the system is to assess, through student test performance data, how well individual teachers teach. But, it seems even more troubling that a second goal of the system is to then prescribe specific ways teachers can improve their instruction based on student test score data.

Beyond this, I argue that an overemphasis on a specific mechanism to monitor and supervise the way public school teachers teach may be counter productive to the aim of educational inequality in Hawaii. When speaking specifically about Hawaii's public school system, University of Hawaii Adjunct Professor Mary Anne Raywid asserts that it happens to already be overly focused on controlling teacher behavior. For evidence she points to a 25-page bill presented to the state Legislature in 2003 to establish an educational accountability system. She notes that,

[i]t specified exactly who was to be accountable for what, how they were to be held accountable, the rewards for successful students, the interventions for unsuccessful ones, how collective professional accountability should be set up and administered, how student achievement should be calculated and how the superintendent should set up the process for designing the system (Raywid, 2002: 3).

Raywid goes on to assert that such "structures of unbelievable complexity to make sure that nobody can goof up or cheat ... also lead to a docile, compliant and relatively uninvolved work force" (Raywid, 2002, p. 3). The simple idea here is that teachers, who are empowered to be creative and are entrusted with the task of educating to the best of their abilities, are more likely to work harder and better than teachers who are boxed in and carefully monitored. In the end, I argue that given the already control obsessed climate in Hawaii's public education system, adding to it an electronic data system designed to use student test scores to closely monitor teacher performance and to prescribe ways to improve instruction, may work to significantly reduce the level of enthusiasm and effort invested into their jobs by Hawaii's public school educators. This, in turn, would inevitably work to further exasperate

educational inequality in the state, because this negative outcome would only impact regular public school children and not private school children.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, if at its foundation the post-racial idea has to do with an adjustment in the fundamental meaning and significance of race and racism in America, I have argued in this paper that any adjustment along these lines will come only with the simultaneous adjustment of the structure of racial inequality that still exists in American society. Moreover, even a place like Hawaii, with its unique diversity, cannot properly be labeled post-racial until it changes, in fundamental ways, the current structure of persistent ethnic inequality that exists throughout the state. One potential way to begin to make this kind of change, I argued above, is to work to address the level of educational inequality that currently exists in the state. And, it happens that the Obama administration has included the aim of reducing state-level educational inequality as part of its most recent and highly touted educational policy called the Race to the Top Fund. Unfortunately, I conclude that this policy is unlikely to make headway toward this aim in the state of Hawaii, because it does not include private school performance within its purview, and because it includes an over emphasis on the need for supervising and controlling public educators.

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