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Cooler classrooms not just about installing AC

By Cedric Ota and Gladys Quinto Marrone
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While the DOE has put out air-conditioning bids for 1,107 of the state's hottest classrooms, as of this month contractors have installed just 209 units while 672 units have been ordered.

If you were re-roofing your house, would you leave a broken skylight in place or repair it? If you were painting your house, would you have the painter paint a door falling off its hinges or replace it first? Sometimes, a simple-sounding project, such as “let’s paint the house,” requires other work, so “painting the house” ends up including carpentry, drywall and electrical work.

The need to perform interconnected work also applies to the state’s “cool schools” initiative, which was the subject of a recent Star-Advertiser story ([“Cooling Schools: AC installation goal only partially reached,” Feb. 26](#)). Most of the school-cooling projects go well beyond simply installing air conditioner and include work such as hazardous material abatement, structural reinforcements, replacing windows and adding photovoltaic (PV) systems with battery backups, along with other specialized work.

Without considering these facts, Corey Rosenlee, president of the Hawaii State Teachers Association, contended that local contractors were overcharging the state Department of Education, saying they should be “embarrassed” for “making profits off the backs of the children of Hawaii.”

We hope those comments were based on misunderstanding, and assume he had not read the guest column that appeared in the Star-Advertiser on July 6, 2016 (“[Cooler classrooms not just about installing AC](#)”) by Clay Asato, then-president of the General Contractors Association, which explained the factors driving up costs for the initiative.

Last Sunday’s Star-Advertiser article stated that “36 companies” have prequalified as bidders. Readers should know that this is more bidders than one would find on a typical private project, and provides a highly competitive process that assures DOE will get the lowest bid proposals for all of the work in each project. And since only the low bidder is awarded the work on each contract, why would all bidders inflate their bid prices and risk not being selected?

The scope of work for the projects varies considerably in detail and complexity and is set forth in project documents created and assembled by architects, engineers and the state — not the contractors. These documents include plans, specifications and Hawaii procurement laws and define the amount of work involved in each school project and, thus, the cost.

Contractors simply bid to perform the work defined by these documents and don’t arrive at bids by dividing the DOE’s budget by the number of classrooms involved. Finally, the state of Hawaii, not the contractors, controls the entire process. As stated, the DOE halted the solicitations after the first round of bids came in over budget, revised the strategy to increase the number of qualified bidders and secured lower costs. The DOE’s solicitation strategy precluded contractor involvement in the process that generated bid specifications and awards.

Before making unfounded accusations, it would be wise for skeptics to do their homework and determine how much it actually costs to perform the various types of work the DOE is requesting.

Representatives from the building industry would be happy to sit down with Mr. Rosenlee and explain the public bidding process and how costs were calculated for these projects so he can gain a more realistic perspective on this issue.

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