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Student legislators were sworn in during the opening legislative session in the Hawaii Supreme Court building Friday as part of the Youth in Government program, revived after a two-year hiatus.



# Back in session

*Student legislators tackle teen issues in the Youth in Government program*

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After taking a two-year break because participation had waned, the Youth in Government program is back in session.

Over the course of the three-day conference that began Thursday evening, 70 seventh- through 12th-graders are introducing and discussing some 30 bills and resolutions, with drafts that survive the mock legislative process going to the youth governor for consideration.

"I ask of you to really under-

stand why this is so important because many of you, I don't (think), know why it's so important because we are all new to this program," Youth Gov. Ryan Clear said in addressing the youth legislators Friday in the Hawaii Supreme Court chamber. Clear was sworn in by the program's first youth governor in 1950, Hartwell Lee Loy.

"Youth (Legislature) gives us the opportunity to express our voice, to express what we really feel should make a difference in society, in our world, in our state," said Clear, a Punahou School senior. "I

can see in your bills that you have this drive to do the change ... so I encourage you to really step forward and really give it your all."

Under the YMCA of Honolulu program, students draft bills, drawing on their life experiences and passions. Bills this year deal with child care for teen moms, appropriations for additional guidance counselors in schools, yearly driver's license testing for elderly residents, environmental issues and more.

The mock legislative process closely mirrors the real-life session with committee meetings; first, second and third readings of measures; and a crossover of bills into the opposite chamber.

"Even if you're a seventh-

grader and this is a very powerful Senate bill in crossover, say if you don't like it, say if you love it, say if you don't understand it," Clear told his delegates. "Speak up. Be passionate. Really give it your all these next couple of days, because we're the beginning. This is our time to really step forward and bring 'lege' back."

Program coordinator Dave Endo said reviving the program — which at its peak attracted hundreds of high-schoolers each year — has been challenging. But he said it's worth it because the program teaches teens valuable life lessons.

"American politics has

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**Students from Oahu and Hawaii island will go through the entire legislative process during the three-day conference, from bill writing to committee meetings, debates, readings and the youth governor signing bills into law.**

**Hartwell Lee Loy, the first youth governor in 1950, swore in this year's governor, Ryan Clear.**

# YOUTH: Student governor sees participants' passion

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devolved into this whole 'my way or the highway' kind of attitude," Endo said. "(We) really work hard at (trying) to get them to understand that this is a problem-solving process, and the best solutions to problems often come from exchanges where you leave your ego at the door."

Endo said eight of Oahu's nine YMCA branches are represented at this year's session, along with 10 students from the Island of Hawaii YMCA. Seventh-, eighth- and ninth-graders make up the House of Representatives, while 10th-, 11th- and 12th-graders are in the Senate.

"What we're really trying to teach you is how to be a responsible citizen," David Lau, a YMCA teen adviser and 1997 youth governor, said during Friday's ceremony. "Things can't get done unless you guys do them, and that's what the government process is. That's why we write bills and resolutions. It is your responsibility to change the future."

In past years, participation in the debate part of the program was limited to high-schoolers, but Endo said it was opened up to middle-schoolers this year to increase participation.

"A lot of their bills ... are not so complicated," Clear said of his younger peers. "They're a bit more simpler, not as prevalent issues, but I still see the passion and that they want change, too."

Endo, who has been involved with the program on and off since the 1980s, said it attracts a wide range of students who bring forth varying issues and concerns based on where they're from. He said the program not only allows teens to interact with peers from other

parts of the state, but it offers them a chance to see matters in a different light.

"What you find out is that teenagers tend to be very siloed in the way that they live and operate," he said, adding that students tend to do only what they're comfortable doing, where they're comfortable doing it. "It really is a matter of ... trying to broaden teenagers' perspectives."

Clear, who was elected during a three-day conference in March, said it's been enlightening for him to work closely with both public and private school students.

"I'm a very driven person, and to see other kids get passionate about pretty school-like atmospheres ... it really just shows me that as a younger generation we can make a difference," he said.

Lau agreed that the program can benefit any teen willing to put forth the effort. He said he had a tough upbringing and that Youth in Government allowed him "to be somebody else for a week."

Lau said, "Some people ask, 'Oh, is it (for) at-risk teens, is it (for) really smart teens?' and I kind of tell them it's for every teen, no matter what level. ... I didn't become a legislator, I barely passed high school, I never graduated from college, but what I did get was a whole ton of experience, and what I realized later in life is that I still have that power to persuade."

Lau said he hopes more Youth in Government alumni will step forward to keep the program going.

"This year would not have been possible without the help of parents, the staff and the volunteers," he said. "We're not going to be able to continue this program unless we get outside help and interest."