



**MICRONESIAN SEMINAR**  
P.O. Box 160  
Pohnpei, FM 96941

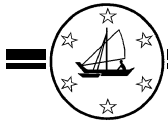


# Micronesian Counselor

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Issue 34

## Islands of Excellence



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### **“Islands Of Excellence”**

Island Topics #27

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### **“The Goals of Ed U. Cation “**

Island Topics #26

Ed U. Cation, magician extraordinaire, visits a community school PTA meeting and helps to conjure up new ideas on the goals of education.



By Francis X. Hezel

## Islands of Excellence

### Introduction

Undeniably, education in Micronesia has its problems. Few eighth-graders in island public schools can read above the third-grade United States standard. Over the past five years more than two out of every three Marshallese public school students failed the Pacific Islands Literacy Skills test. The average score for FSM sixth-graders on the national standards test for math was a low 37 percent. Throughout the region dropout rates are high. Only one of every four students beginning first grade will make it to high school graduation.

But it would be unfair to represent this as the whole of the educational picture in Micronesia, for some schools in Micronesia have made long strides forward against great odds. The schools presented in this article, while they are not the only good schools, are a sample of some of the very best—not just as measured in their test scores, but in their reputation for good instruction and creative programs. If education in Micronesia is sometimes presented as a “sea of mediocrity,” these schools stand as islands of excellence in that sea. In this article we would like to showcase these schools, while holding them to the light to help understand what makes good schools work.

The schools highlighted in this article represent every part of Micronesia. They are elementary schools because any serious attempt at educational reform must begin at the very basic level and proceed upward through the school system. All the schools chosen are also public schools. Private schools are expected to be high-quality, but very good public schools can draw the attention of educators because they are still regarded as something of a novelty. If a few public schools can achieve results like this, any school should be able to improve.

### Chuuk

Because Chuuk State is not renowned for the quality of its public schools, with a median score of only 36 on the high school entrance

schooling to Micronesia, even if our most recent and imposing models have been the public school systems created by the Japanese and American administrations. At one time schools might have been dismissed as foreign artifacts, but not today after decades of adaptation under local leadership. Formal education, once grafted from an alien plant, has taken root in island Micronesia and bears rich fruit in at least some places.

Micronesian educators need not turn immediately to the U.S. for solutions to the educational problems it experiences. Nor should they regard private schools, as outstanding as their contribution has been over the years, as the only models of quality education. Public education has its own success stories, multiplying by the year, that deserve more attention than they are receiving. In its brief description of a few of these “islands of excellence,” this article has tried to show a few of the innovative approaches to curriculum adaptation and, even more importantly, to highlight some of the management strategies that these schools have successfully employed.


The approaches that these schools have taken en route to educational excellence are varied, as we have seen. While there is no simple formula for school success to be found in these stories, there are certainly a few common themes that emerge. Many of the schools described here would not have been able to accomplish what they did without strong community support that developed over time into a sense of community ownership of their school. As a thread that runs through the description of several of the schools selected for presentation here, strong community support seems to be a useful starting point for attempts to reform education. The second theme of these success stories is strong leadership, usually but not always in the person of the principal. Some schools continue to draw on the inspiration and creative work of a past administrator, while others look for leadership to other prominent figures in the community. In the final analysis, it seems, strong leadership and effective community support can bring about radical improvement in a school, even one that lacks adequate resources, is underfunded, and is without a particularly well-trained group of teachers.

Francis X. Hezel, SJ

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This is the fourth of four education articles written in collaboration with PREL, and through PREL's financial assistance.



when students are sent home for lunch.

Good schools have a way of turning such liabilities into opportunities, however. Any student at Lelu who is performing poorly is invited back to the school after lunch for tutoring and special remedial work. A program to assist slower students known as the Gear Up Program provides for this special instruction. Kosrae's education policy is to offer all the assistance needed to improve the performance of marginal students so that they can qualify for high school. When students do not pass the high school entrance test, as happened to two students last year, they are given an extra semester of computerized study to help them achieve the necessary skills for secondary school. Failing is simply not an option for students at Lelu Elementary School. The two students who did not pass the entrance test the first time were admitted to high school following their successful semester of remedial work.

The size of the student enrollment, although perhaps a drawback, offers the school an opportunity to departmentalize from the very lowest grades up. Teachers are assigned to teach a single course or two rather than having to cover all the subjects with their students. Hence, teachers who excel in math will teach only that subject, while language arts teachers will teach nothing but their specialty.

Like Koror Elementary School, Lelu shows that educational excellence is not only attainable by small village schools that enjoy tight community support. Large schools situated in town can also work well when properly managed.

## Conclusion

When confronted with what sometimes appear to be insoluble difficulties with their schools, educators may be tempted to resort to throwing up their hands and writing off schools as a foreign innovation that is incompatible with island culture and its management style. If this is so, then poorly functioning schools, like broken-down pickups, should either be fixed with the help of the (Japanese or Korean or American) manufacturer's manual or, failing this, relegated to the junkyard. In this view, the solutions to educational problems, if there are any, are to be found in American educational strategies, since the schools are seen as foreign imports of U.S. design.

But the truth is that Micronesian schools, like Micronesian churches, have become an indispensable feature of the socio-cultural landscape in the islands today. Indeed, it was churches, not foreign governments, that first introduced formal

test over the past five years, its successful schools stand out even more sharply than in other places. Mechetiw, the leading school in Chuuk by this measure, boasts an average of 83 percent over this period, while Moch, the third highest school, has an average of 78.


Moch Elementary School, serving a small island in the Mortlocks, has been one of the bright spots in Chuuk's education picture for the past several years. Rebuilt just a few years ago, Moch's school is an impressive two-story, L-shaped building wearing a proud new coat of white paint with maroon trim. In its design and decor the school resembles Saramen Chuuk Academy, a ten-year-old Catholic high school which was built at about the same time and under the leadership of clergy from Moch. Constructed with municipal funds supplemented by a Congress of FSM grant, the island school towers over the coral island, together with Moch's newly built church, as a monument to the community's pride and self-definition.

Moch's desire to on its island did not end building. The oversight of school the school staff to ensure the high school entrance school insisted that its grade level so that its required to attend junior of Satawan. Moch, a strong notions of what constitutes proper behavior for the young, is able to keep its early high-school-age youth on a tight leash for two more years even as they strive to upgrade the early secondary level of education for their sons and daughters.



advance the work of education with the construction of a new community provided close operations and kept pressure on that most students were passing test. Within a few years, the school be expanded to the tenth students would no longer high school on the nearby island tight-knit community with

Mechetiw Elementary School, one of the newest public schools in Chuuk, is located in the heart of Weno, the population center of Chuuk, at the opposite end of the urban-rural spectrum from Moch. Mechetiw School, now only about ten years old, has been near the top of the list of Chuuk's public schools since the day it opened. At first classes were held in a thatched hut that leaked so badly that classes had to be cancelled whenever it rained, but just four years ago a new concrete building was put up. Built on land belonging to the village and funded in part by municipal money, Mechetiw School is a community-owned operation. Villagers feel free to



use the school building for community meetings any time school is not in session. Danny Manyar, the principal, explains: “This place, this land, belongs to the village. It doesn’t belong to the government . . . So we have the right, the power, the authority to use the building because it belongs to the community.”

The village chief, Chitaro William, was heavily involved in the operations of the school from the outset. He is usually at the school two or three times a week, sometimes opening the gate in the fence surrounding the school before the first students arrive. He will occasionally line up the students himself and run the morning assembly, reminding students of the importance of their education and urging them to study hard. As the first classes begin, he and some of the parents sit outside the school building checking to make sure that the students and their teachers are on time. If a teacher should fail to appear, one of the parents will take over the class. The delinquent teacher, however, is not allowed to skip class with impunity. The following day he will have to face the reproachful looks of his fellow teachers and answer to the principal or possibly the village chief himself. The principal has served notice to his staff that any teacher who misses more than three days of class will be put on leave without pay and runs the risk of losing his job at the end of the year.

One indication of community support for the school is attendance at Parent-Teacher Association meetings, which the PTA chairman claims more than a hundred people often attend. At one of their meetings, they agreed that the family of any student who does not show up for class will be fined 25 cents. Another indication is the readiness of the community to clean the classrooms and the school grounds. But the most telling measure of the support of the community for its school is its insistence that instruction should continue for the entire school day. When the government-sponsored hot lunch program was terminated, the village decided that it would feed its students rather than end the school day at 1 PM, as some of the other schools in Chuuk had been doing. For a year the community brought food to school and prepared lunch for its students until the decision was made to have students bring their own lunch, a practice that continues until today. Meanwhile, teachers pool their own food to provide a potluck for the staff every day of the week—an innovation proposed by the principal proposed and willingly agreed to by the staff. The reason for the change, the principal tells them, is that as they share food with each other, the spirit of cooperation grows among the staff.

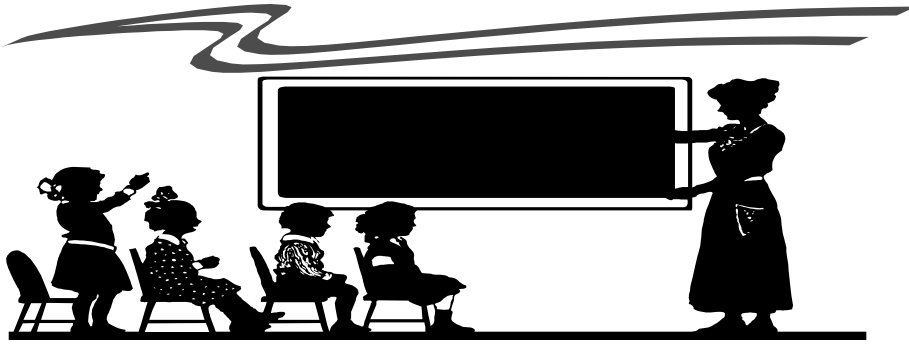
stands with Peleliu Elementary School and one or two others as the leading schools of Palau by virtue of its standard test scores.

The community cohesiveness and sense of purpose that was so integral to the success of some of the village schools was a very small factor in the turnaround of Koror Elementary School, located as it is in the center of town. Because most of the parents, mothers as well as fathers, are employed, there is not the same degree of support that is to be found in smaller rural schools. Attendance at PTA meetings, although it can number over a hundred people at times, is still small when viewed against the size of the student body. The construction and the maintenance of the school is left entirely to the Ministry of Education and the school staff. Parents may help out in small ways, as when they purchased two blackboards for a first-grade teacher who sought their help, but they are not a major force in fashioning the school’s policies or participating in its day-to-day operations.

What, then, was responsible for the recent improvement in the school? To judge from interviews with the staff, a principal with vision, a strong sense of purpose, and the personal skills necessary to fuse the forty teachers into a team. In this case, the principal seems to have focused on two important areas: establishing high standards of discipline for students and clear expectations for the staff, and a commitment to helping teachers grow in their work skills and personal development. While the principal might hold teachers to account for their behavior, he also was ready to listen to a staff member’s problems and offer them opportunities to attend workshops that might help make them better teachers. Most of the Palau schools, one teacher observed, have computer labs these days. It is not these or any other facilities that bring about education reforms; it is dedicated leadership committed to quality education.

### *Kosrae*

Since Kosrae’s schools, like those in Palau and the main island of Yap, show relatively little difference in their test scores, nearly any one of them could have been used as a model of excellence. Lelu Elementary School, the school selected for Kosrae, is one of the biggest schools on the island with an enrollment of about 540 students. Due to the lack of classroom space at the local public high school, Lelu Elementary School has been forced to add a ninth grade. In addition to its large enrollment, the school is forced to operate under other limitations. A cutback in the number of work hours per week for all government employees means that school is in session only four days a week and for shortened hours each day. The regular class day ends at 1:30 PM



climate of the school and improve the morale among staff and students. He began by insisting that the teachers dress like professionals and that they wear shoes and trousers and nice shirts rather than the tee-shirts and shorts that they had been showing up in previously. Beginning with his new dress code, the principal led them to look at themselves and their work in a different light. He stressed the importance of interaction among the faculty, for they were all jointly responsible for creating a climate of success, he reasoned. He visited teachers' classrooms frequently, commenting on even smaller details, such as the way in which the teacher's desk was positioned, and how these details can affect a teacher's control of the class. Always he would urge that his teachers be innovative: "Try something different, something new" was his constant appeal to his staff.

The effects of his reforms were palpable. Teacher absenteeism dropped. Teachers began to rely on one another for advice and encouragement, meanwhile generating real enthusiasm for their work with students. As the climate in the school changed and the "can do" spirit for which Peleliu was well known infused the school, test scores improved and children began to spend more time at the school, even after classes were ended. One strong magnet was the computer lab that Wenty had managed to set up, with the help of outside funding, even as he succeeded in persuading all his staff to become computer literate. The children looked for excuses to hang around the school each day, often spending their time in the computer lab. Like their teachers, students had become comfortable at school. They were also proud of their school. The community of Peleliu were, too, for they knew that their island was now distinguished for more than its fabled athletic ability.

Reform of a small village school is one matter, but to bring about an educational turn-about in a large urban school is a different thing altogether. Take, for instance, the case of Koror Elementary School, with an enrollment of nearly 800 students. For years the school was overshadowed by George Harris Elementary School, Koror's other large public school. Now, however, it




The faculty, with assistance from many of the parents, also offer extra instruction for those students who are lagging behind their peers. Weekend classes are offered before tests, especially for the two or three weeks prior to the high school entrance test. It's hard to imagine a public school open on a Saturday, but this is the case at such times at Mechetiw School. Parents from other villages on the island have begun pulling their children out of their own village schools and enrolling them in Mechetiw. The success of the school, which has stood each year at or near the top of the list of elementary schools, public and private, is attracting wide attention.

Teachers at Mechetiw School are no better paid than anywhere else in Chuuk. Its textbook cabinets, also, would be as barren as those of other schools if it were not for the fact that every summer its teachers make a point of scouring the education supplies warehouse for any castoff books that they think they might be able to use. When asked what accounts for the school's obvious success, the principal points to his heart and simply states that anyone who really wants a good school can get what they want. "If we really want to achieve, if we try our best to create a good school, we'll have one." Mechetiw Elementary School's story is that of a community determined to do just that: to have a good school.

### ***Pohnpei***

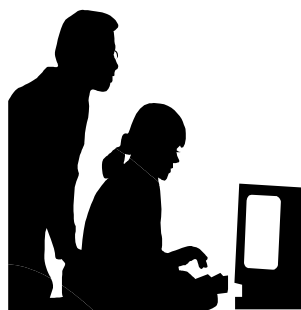
Perhaps ten miles out of town, a visitor will notice a break in the mangroves and undergrowth. In a small clearing enclosed by a chainlink fence stands a neat, two-story building that for years has had the reputation of being one of Pohnpei's very best public schools: Seinwar Elementary School. (As our MicSem team made their tour of the top schools in Micronesia, they noticed that neatness and cleanliness were a feature of all these schools, as if academic quality and neatness were somehow linked to one another.) The orderliness is apparent everywhere: in the zorries lined up outside the classroom doors, in the polite Pohnpeian greeting that students chant in unison when a visitor enters the room, even in the line of students walking single-file on one side of the road on their way to and from school. The visitor quickly gets the impression that this is a no-nonsense operation.

That impression is confirmed on meeting the principal, Eugenio




Ardos, a rather grave man of few words and patently serious purpose who has headed the school for the past twenty-eight years. When one of the teachers says that discipline in this school is “mighty strong,” the visitor is immediately prepared to accept this statement as the truth. Student absenteeism is very low, the teacher explains. What is even more remarkable, however, is that teacher absenteeism, a chronic problem in most other schools, is almost nil. On Pohnpei, where funerals are week-long occasions steeped in custom that reconfigure the schedules of everyone even distantly related to the deceased, teachers at Seinwar are told that they may absent themselves from class only when someone in their immediate family has died. Otherwise, they are instructed, they must attend the funeral outside of school hours. Teachers faithfully comply with these strictures, as counter-cultural as they might seem. Few other organizations on Pohnpei would dare to make such demands of their employees.

Orders coming from the principal are never taken lightly, the visitor suspects. Eugenio Ardos is the undisputed master of this ship, respected not only for his long years of service and his achievements at the school, but because he is the village chief and a senior relative of most of those who teach at Seinwar. Two of the teachers at the school are his brothers, two more his offspring, and mostly everyone else a cousin, nephew or niece. With such a strong lock on the controls, Ardos runs a tight ship. Most teachers arrive at 7:30 in the morning, a half hour before the first classes begin, and they are often there until 4:30 or 5:00 in the afternoon, correcting papers and preparing lessons for the following day. Ardos has high expectations of his staff. Not only are they to be present faithfully every day—untended classes, common in many other schools, are almost unknown at Seinwar—but they are expected to have their classes prepared in detail and to deliver effective instruction.



If the principal speaks with authority, it is because he has the support of the community behind him. Seinwar was a private school run by the Catholic Church until 1970 when it was turned over to the government to become a public school. A good part of the community had attended the school when it was church-run and insisted on maintaining the reputation for academic excellence that the school had attained in its earlier years. Ardos, who was a



one that is guided but not constrained by goals and curriculum issued by the state department of education. When asked what was the strongest feature of the school, the chairman of the PTA replied without hesitation: “community participation.” He left no doubt that Dalipebinaw could not have achieved what it has if it had not been a school that truly belonged to the community.


## *Palau*

Peleliu, the site of a famous World War II battle, is an island that lies about twenty miles south of Koror. With a population of no more than a few hundred people, the island might seem to be a backwater in a nation that has become known for its rapid and successful modernization. Yet, Peleliu boasts one of the very best elementary schools in Palau. Peleliu Elementary School, the single school on the island, has placed near the top of the list of Palau schools in the standard tests given each year and has become synonymous with quality education.

The school had one enormous asset from the start: a strong community spirit like that of Seinwar and Likiep and some of the other places from which good schools have emerged. Peleliu seems to be well known, even by Palau standards, for its “can do” spirit and its desire to excel. “People from Peleliu expect their island to be at the top,” is the way one local educator puts it. The island has always had a reputation for producing some of the fastest runners and some of the best athletes in Palau. More often than not, teams from the island win the field days and sports events in which they compete. When they do, they receive resounding acclaim from the people of their island, who turn out in surprising numbers to cheer on their athletes.

Peleliu may have enjoyed a reputation as a sports powerhouse, but its school was mediocre until Emery Wenty took over as principal in 1992. The school’s test scores for the yearly high school entrance test were close to the bottom. At that time, he recalls, teachers were casual in showing up for work on time and would frequently skip classes on Friday to spend the day in Koror. Teachers did their own work when they were in school but seldom talked with one another about their classes or broader issues touching the entire school. “There were no clear standards or guidelines or rules or policies that students and faculty were expected to follow,” Wenty recalls.

When he became principal, Wenty immediately set about to change the




from his staff. The suggestion box outside his office is one indication of this, but an even more striking one is his willingness to spend up to two hours in a school assembly each week evaluating the educational efforts and strategies that the staff has been using.

Naz admits that some of his passion for good education was born of his own frustrations as a student. When he himself was still a student at Maap Community School, the school was closed for a time because of lack of funds. Since he was unable to find transportation to the nearest village school, he stayed home for a year, until his own school was reopened. He vowed that he would never allow that same thing to happen to his own students. Perhaps he need not fear, for his enthusiasm seems to have infected his teaching staff and the Maap community. Even though he may be the guiding force in the school, he is clear in stating that the school belongs to the people of Maap, not only in theory but through their heavy involvement in policy making and direction.

Dalipebinaw School, which is situated just a few minutes down the road from the garment factory and much closer to town, is sometimes referred to as “the showcase of the state education department.” When that remark is made by a person from Dalipebinaw, it is usually followed with a wry explanation that the village school owes just as much to the community as it does to the education department. The building itself, a spanking new two-story concrete structure with a huge water catchment alongside, was the result of the community’s hard work in seeking outside sources of funding. The village decided to sidestep the education department and work directly with outside donors to obtain the money they needed to put up their new school building. The community then created their own curriculum, incorporating into it whatever elements of the state-designed curriculum they felt were appropriate. When a child is enrolled at Dalipebinaw, the parents are required to sign a contract in which they agree to allow the child to participate in all school activities and they commit themselves to coming to the school to discuss their child’s behavior with the staff.

The school’s strong ties to the community are part of the legacy of a former principal, who died a few years ago. Since the present principal is young and has little experience in education, the staff and community still reverently invoke the policies that the earlier principal formulated so as to continue the directions that he set for the school. Even aside from its strong community links, Dalipebinaw has such an appealing educational program and reputation for excellence that it attracts students from other villages on the island. The school sees itself as called to be a superior educational institution,



teacher at Seinwar during its final years as a private school, draws his inspiration from what the school was in those years and is a living link with the school’s earlier tradition.


From the beginning, the community exercised strong control over school policies and the selection of teachers. The people of Seinwar never relinquished to the education department the responsibility for the management of what they continued to regard as their own school. At times this has brought the community into head-on confrontation with the education department, as when the community opposed the introduction of a newly devised unit that would add music and art to the curriculum. The community vetoed the decision, choosing to retain their present emphasis on basic skills. The state education department withdrew their order and allowed the community to take the lead in shaping its own educational vision.

### ***Marshalls***

When someone asks what the best public school is in the Marshalls, the answer comes easily. Likiep, of course. None of the other public elementary schools even comes close in the annual standard tests that are used to measure student achievement. With an average pass rate of 82 percent on the high school entrance test and the top score in the PILLS test over the past five years, Likiep stands, alone of all the public schools, in the select company of the private schools, at the head of the list.

Some people attribute this to the unique history of the island, which was purchased from traditional chiefs by two European settlers over a hundred years ago. Most, however, give the credit to the Maryknoll Sisters, who took over the administration of the school in 1994. The sisters signed a memorandum of understanding with the Ministry of Education that they would assume responsibility for operating Likiep Elementary School as a public school. Up to that time, the school had an undistinguished record; teacher absenteeism was high, classes were conducted only half a day, and very few of the eighth graders were accepted for high school. The community was dissatisfied with its school and enthusiastically agreed to having the sisters take over the running of the school. The people of Likiep had a happy experience with the Maryknoll Sisters in the 1950s when they ran a top-quality school on the island for nearly a decade before the dwindling population forced the closing of the school.

When the sisters took over, they did not bring a large broom to sweep




away what had gone before. The teachers, dedicated people but without direction, stayed on at the school. Unlike many other schools in the Marshalls and FSM, Likiep Elementary School had instructional materials—dated but adequate. What the sisters brought to the school was a sense of purpose, a detailed curriculum, and willingness to train the teachers in how to use the curriculum guide. As one person remarked they also insisted that the teachers come on time every day and that classes not be canceled at the slightest excuse.

The community supported the changes that the sisters made in the school. Likiep had long thought of itself as distinct from and perhaps more progressive than other Marshallese atolls. Years ago when the island was purchased and settled by foreigners, it was freed from chiefly authority and embarked on a long history of fusing European pragmatism with island ways. Whatever problems their school may have had through the years, the people on Likiep always had a sense of how important education was. Today the Likiep community has taken ownership of their school as they never did before the turn-about in the school. PTA meetings are very well attended; most families have at least one member representing them at the meeting.

The school possesses a vitality today that is the envy of other schools in the area. The children in the lower grades maintain a garden plot, with students not only tending their plants but measuring them and graphing their growth over time to help them learn the basic skills they will need in their science courses. Students engage in the same type of hands-on learning through their work with tiny turtles in a shoreside tank that is part of the school's conservation project. Students also walk around the school grounds picking up trash each day, and there is no graffiti to be seen on any of the school buildings. As we find in many of the other top-flight schools, the student body and community have become protective of the appearance of their school.

Three years ago the Maryknoll Sisters turned over the administration of the school to the principal and community leaders, but since then Likiep has maintained its high standing among Marshalls public schools. Teachers continue to use the curriculum guides that the sisters introduced, and the school policies presented in the handbook are still embraced by the community and enforced by the faculty. Two Maryknoll Sisters still visit the school two or three times a year to hold training sessions for the teachers and to encourage the community to keep a vigilant eye on school operations. Their visits are essential to the success of the school since the sisters act as kind of a quality control; they make sure that the curriculum is being followed and make



revisions in the curriculum materials as needed. To date the transition appears to have been successful, at least to judge from test scores of the students, for Likiep's students continue to pass the entrance test to the public high schools in very high numbers, with some of the better students qualifying for some of the more exclusive private schools in the region.

## Yap

Several schools in mainland Yap score well on the annual exit test, but there are a small handful of schools that seem to possess special sources of creative energy. Two of these, perhaps the two with the highest overall reputations as superior schools, are Maap and Dalipebinaw.

Maap Community School is a long drive from town, located as it is at the end of a dirt road on the outskirts of one of the most remote villages of Yap. The buildings are well-kept but plain; perpendicular to the school office is the main classroom building, a long, cinderblock structure that is like those seen in many other parts of Micronesia. Yet, visitors to the school usually say that there is an energy about the place that makes it distinctive. Whether the teachers are in the school yard leading a game of kickball with their students or teaching arithmetic, they seem enthused about what they're doing. So do their students. Maap Community School has been known for years for its innovative instructional programs. It was the first school on Yap to dedicate one day a week to cultural activities: Yapese dancing, storytelling, farming, and island crafts such as basket-weaving. All other schools in Yap now follow Maap's lead, since these same cultural activities have been integrated into the curriculum as the Life Arts Program.

At the center of the school's life is its soft-spoken and unassuming principal, Naz Ganangret, who taught for sixteen years before he was appointed principal in 1988. The principal's humble demeanor belies his influence on the life of the school. He encourages the creativity of teachers, challenging them to find new and better ways to instruct pupils. When he developed the cultural activities program that would become the inspiration for the Life Arts segment of the state curriculum, he was transferred from his present position to the state education office to help design the new curriculum units. Within a year, however, he was reassigned to Maap Community School at the insistence of his staff, who show the same loyalty to him today that they did then. His teachers invariably comment on how he constantly solicits input