End of Summer
Hopes and Challenges

As I sit down to write for this week’s Saturday Briefing, a number of thoughts come to mind. First of all, we have come to the end of a great summer season in Hawaii. No matter how one looks at the numbers—employment opportunity, hotel occupancy, visitor days, visitor spending, taxes generated, etc.—this has been one of the best summers ever.

It is hard to believe that just a few years ago, the outlook for Hawaii’s visitor industry was so bleak. On November 17, 2002, the Honolulu Advertiser ran a multi-page report on tourism in Hawaii. The headlines read, “Battered, but surviving. The tourism industry has had a rough year, but business has stabilized. Will things get better?”

Things did get much better for a number of reasons, including an improved U.S. economy, excellent promotion of Hawaii, the strength of the euro and other foreign currencies, and the perception that Hawaii is a safe place to visit in a world rocked by terrorism. In addition, everyone in Hawaii’s visitor industry worked hard to deliver what is arguably the world’s finest hospitality experience.

Looking ahead, bookings are strong for the next few months. The multi-island Aloha Festivals start in about two weeks and several sports events will bring athletes and their friends and supporters to Waikiki toward the end of September. In November, 17,000 convention-goers will attend the meetings of the International Foundation of Employee Benefit Plans at the Hawaii Convention Center. That will be one of the biggest meetings ever held at the center since its opening in 1997.

The end of August also marks the time when students return to school, and that brings to mind the sad state of our country’s system of public education. Scanning the news, one finds that nearly every community across our nation is struggling to fund public education and improve its quality.

The situation is particularly bad in Hawaii, as confirmed by the scores from the latest round of Hawaii State Assessment tests. Despite modest improvements, especially in the lower grades, approximately two-thirds of Hawaii’s public school students still tested below grade level in math and over half tested below grade level in reading skills.

Results like that would be totally unacceptable in the business world. How long would our company be in business if two-thirds of our accounting did not add up and over half our hotel rooms were below standard?

We should regard these results as unacceptable for our students and our school system as well. Our children’s widespread inability to keep up in math and to read “at grade level”—we’re not talking rocket science here!—is a monumental scandal. Unfortunately, so many of us have gotten accustomed to the failure of our schools to give our children the skills they need that substandard education now seems “normal.” We need to understand that by failing to properly prepare our children for life beyond graduation, we are shortchanging them and condemning too many of them to a life of severely restricted opportunities. Our kids deserve better.

Public education can be much, much better, but it takes strong, consistent voter pressure on our politicians to turn the system around. Until enough people in Hawaii and communities across the nation focus on this issue, our schools will continue to turn out generation after generation of graduates who are not prepared to compete with their counterparts around the world and who will suffer economically as a result.

So, as we end the summer and begin the last third of 2005, we should be thankful for a
magnificent year so far. We should also be mindful that Travel & Tourism is a very fragile industry, and events far from our shores can cause drastic changes in travel patterns almost overnight.

And finally, we should all look beyond our daily lives and think about what we can personally do to help improve public education in our communities. The future of our state and our nation—not to mention our kids!—may well depend on what we can accomplish in this vital area.