



SCHOOL OF THOUGHT

Navigating Hawai'i's complex world of education can be as confusing as advanced calculus. So we present a cheat-sheet, plus a look at some of the trends in Native Hawaiian education. →

BY KATHRYN DRURY WAGNER
PHOTOS BY DAVID CROXFORD

“Across the nation, and worldwide, there are conversations happening about immersion programs, and indigenous education,” says Cheryl Ka’uhane Lupenui, a board member of the Hawai’i State Board of Education and chairperson for the Student Achievement Committee. “We have to look at this at a system level,” says Lupenui.

Hawaiian-language immersion and cultural programs started nearly three decades ago in the public education system, and it’s high time, she says, “to build off of what has been done. A lot of work and love have been put into these programs. There are great plans, experiences and examples. We need to draw on that and have it guide us into the future.”

While there is a lot of opportunity, there’s also a lot of complexity. Let’s take a look at some of the models for Native Hawaiian education. MANA focuses here on the public school system, which educates about 87 percent of Native Hawaiian students in the state, according to the 2000 U.S. Census.

IMMERSION SCHOOLS

When most people think of Hawaiian education, they think of immersion schools. But what exactly is a Hawaiian language immersion school? An immersion school teaches a variety of subjects, all in the Hawaiian language. These schools must meet Hawai’i public school standards, as well as the learning objectives set by the language-based school.

The first Hawaiian immersion school opened in 1987. Now there are 14 immersion schools in the state Department of Education, says Kau’ilani Sang, the DOE’s educational specialist for the Hawaiian Language Immersion Program. Two are self-contained K-12 schools; that’s a complete campus of Hawaiian immersion where student contact is always in Hawaiian. Other schools have a “school-within-a-school” model. In immersion schools, English is introduced in fifth grade. The majority of students in immersion programs—93 percent—are Hawaiian, says Sang.

To enroll, families opt in, though there can be limitations based on how many teaching staff are available. “For example, in Pā’ia, on Maui, there was only one kindergarten teacher,” Sang says. “They were going to have to do a lottery on who would get in, because something like 40 students had applied, but the parents found another Hawaiian speaker and they were able to open up another class.”

Particularly at the secondary level, it can be hard for the DOE to find highly qualified teachers. A math teacher has to teach math, in Hawaiian—not the easiest skill set to find. Another challenge is course materials, which have to be either translated or created by the teachers themselves. “That’s a challenge at the state level,” Sang says, “because each school may value a different type of curriculum.”

Another hot issue has been student assessment, which MANA covered in our March/ April 2013 story, “Lost in Translation: Hawaiian language immersion schools fight for educational equality.” Hawaiian immersion students and teachers have said that the required Hawai’i State Assessment (HSA) tests, translated from English into Hawaiian, are inaccurate and confusing, and should be written in Hawaiian from the start.

Still, immersion has been a model for success in the public school system, based on both parent satisfaction and graduation rates. The schools have graduated 450 students in just over 25 years.

CULTURE AS FOUNDATION

Students who do not have Hawaiian language as a medium of instruction can still benefit from education rooted in their culture either through programs in DOE public schools, or within the charter-school system. Rooted in Hawaiian principles of living, such as aloha ‘āina and kuleana, the programs encourage discovery, critical exploration and building community. While they must meet the standards of Hawai’i public schools, they offer an alternative to standard operating procedures.

HAWAIIAN STUDIES FOR ALL

According to Donalyn Dela Cruz, the director of communications and community affairs for the Hawai'i State Department of Education, the DOE is complying with Article X, Section 4 of the Hawai'i State Constitution, providing a Hawaiian Studies program. The program is overseen by the department's Hawaiian Language Immersion Program and covers grades K-12. The Kūpuna Component is for elementary and middle-school students through grades six, and enlists "CPR," or Cultural Personnel Resources trained by the DOE to provide Hawaiian Studies enrichment. The second component provides support, says Cruz, for these courses: Ancient Hawaiian Civilization, taken by fourth graders; Hawaiian Monarchy, taken by seventh graders; and Modern Hawaiian History, for ninth and eleventh grade students. The DOE also offers elective courses for grades 7-12 including Hawaiian Dance, Hawaiian Language, Hawaiian Studies and Ethnic Studies.

"It's a different way of thinking and seeing the world," says Lupenui, who went to an American-style school on the East Coast and then Tulane, before coming to Hawai'i. "For years I tried to learn Hawaiian, learning the words and grammar, but it didn't click until I got to learn it in a more Hawaiian way. Having to think in Hawaiian. It changed how I saw myself, my relationships, my business. Our language is our culture. They are not separate."

According to Taffi Wise, executive director of the Kanu o ka 'Āina Learning 'Ohana in Waimea, "Indigenous cultures focus more on the direct experiences, tested by generations." Knowledge is adapted to the local culture and environment, she says, and the emotions that go with the knowledge. "The ancestral knowledge, the intuition, it's all connected. That's very different from the Western way. Western is more the evidence-based mind, the test scores. It doesn't mean one is right or wrong; it's just different.

"Education is a way out of suppression," says Wise. "Inappropriate public education is the biggest socioeconomic injustice we have in the nation. Indigenous people have the right to determine their education for their children. ... We're just not keeping up with their needs."

Kanu o ka 'Āina Learning 'Ohana programs include Kanu o ka 'Āina New Century Public Charter School (K-12), Mālamapōki'i Family-based Early Childhood Education Program (for keiki ages 0 to 5) and Hālau Wānana Native Hawaiian Center for Higher Learning (post-secondary education).

CHARTERED TERRITORY

Hawai'i's charter schools, which include Kanu o ka 'Āina Learning 'Ohana, are an arm of the Department of Education; every school is a state agency. In most states, charters are private nonprofits that are deemed a public school for certain purposes. Hawai'i's charter schools have more autonomy and flexibility—in some ways. Charter schoolteachers are still unionized, and are part of the same bargaining unit as their DOE counterparts. However, the charter schools are funded differently than DOE schools, receiving significantly smaller per-pupil allocations than other public schools. Many charters, therefore, have an associated nonprofit that supplements the public funding. Another difference: Charter schools do not have an attendance zone restricting the school to only students that live in a certain area, as public schools usually have.

The Native Hawaiian population is well represented in charter schools: about 2,900 out of 10,000 students, says the Charter School Commission's executive director, Tom Hutton. Of the 33 charters in the state, "10 are Hawaiian-language focused, and four have a strong focus on Hawaiian language and culture and are located in places where the Native Hawaiian population is high."

Charter schools are formed in two ways. There's the startup model, like that of Kanu o ka 'Āina Learning 'Ohana. A new school will typically start with one or two grades, such as kindergarten and first, and add incrementally as the student body grows. The costs are higher, as the school needs a home and charter schools do not get facility funding; they have to take it out of their operating cost.

It's no accident that a lot of the startup charter schools are either Hawaiian-language immersion or Hawaiian-culture focused. "It's easier to build a school around a theme using the school-of-choice model, coming around its own vision," says Hutton. "That is very empowering and exciting for people. You start a school that is in the Hawaiian language, for example, all the parents who sent their child there have opted in. That's different than if it's a conversion school, or an immersion school within a school."

The other way charter schools form is a conversion school, like Kualapu'u Public Conversion Charter School. In these schools, a public school already in existence switches over after a vote of faculty and parents, says Hutton.

Kualapu'u Elementary School on Moloka'i began its conversion from public to charter in 2004, and immediately added a pre-K to its K-6th-grade school. "The younger we can get children, the better," says principal Lydia Trinidad. The conversion to charter "felt like a leap of faith, but I think it's the best thing. The school is now more student-focused. We have a longer school day than most traditional schools, and physical education every day. We have been making our academic targets, but balancing that with enrichment programs." For example, an after-school gardening program has students tending plants in container gardens, not just to consume, but also as a lesson in business: They market and sell their produce.



← Kanu o ka 'Āina school imbues Hawaiian culture whether it's getting students involved in a hula drama (top left) or on the water with the E Ola Pono Camp (middle left).



{ Kualapu'u Elementary volunteers (below and right) help students clean a vegetable box that doubles as a lesson for students in business. }



Kualapu‘u also has a school-within-a-school immersion program, says Trinidad. And, recently, she’s found teacher recruiting is getting easier. “We’re starting to see teacher candidates who either went through an immersion language school or studied Hawaiian in college and have an elementary degree. That’s evidence that small but incremental change is happening.”

When immersion programs started on Moloka‘i in 1991, says Lokelani Han, a Hawaiian immersion teacher at Kualapu‘u and current president of the Moloka‘i HSTA chapter, “People thought it was a phase, teaching children in Hawaiian in today’s society. Books weren’t printed in Hawaiian. We had to type text on the typewriter, and paste the words into the books, literally. The parents raised money so that the kids could have field trips to sacred places or work on reforestation of native plants. Our families have had to be fighters, and the program survived.”

LESSONS LEARNED

This July, what had been the Charter School Administrative Office was replaced by the Charter School Commission. The change was due to a 2012 state law, Act 130. “The Administrative Office handled the granting of charters and was all things to all people: the advocate, the oversight. It’s been kind of muddled,” says Hutton, who started his job in February.

The Commission is state funded and will be “more focused on the authorizer role,” he says, as a government oversight entity. “It’s a relative shift. We aren’t walking away from supporting charter schools. We’re not just the big bad accountability people and that’s it.” But, the advocacy and support will be more on the DOE level, as well as the responsibility of the charter schools themselves.

For some, DOE charter school efforts don’t go far enough. “My opinion is that [charter schools] are the only saving grace for Article X,” says Wise. Article X, Section 4, of the Hawai‘i State Constitution says, “The State shall provide for a



Principal of Kualapu‘u Elementary, Lydia Trinidad



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Teacher Mike Kahale (top in blue) instructs students at Moloka‘i Middle School.

Teacher Kaho‘iwai Kawa‘a (bottom in purple) guides a student at Moloka‘i Middle School. The school was recognized last year as the most improved public school in Hawai‘i.



Hawaiian education program consisting of language, culture and history in the public schools. The use of community expertise shall be encouraged as a suitable and essential means in furtherance of the Hawaiian education program.” Yet many of the people we spoke to felt that this is simply not happening.

“I would challenge the DOE and BOE to look to the charter schools and take the implementation we do back to the public schools. There are amazing models that can be used and tweaked for the betterment of all our children,” says Wise.

The best things about being a charter, she says, are innovation, passion and partnerships. “The communities are so unique; they know what’s best for their kids.” The worst things? “Resources and facilities. When we did the equity study, our kids were getting 50 percent of what the public schools are getting, but the bar is set higher. You can’t feed, transport, house all the students and meet the standards for union pay. We have to raise the money, educate the Legislature, to make this movement survive.”

Hawaiian students, she says, need similar grit and perseverance to navigate the world. “We have to be willing to help them through it and it has to be relevant to them. It’s where going to college is an expectation or, if you go into a trade, that’s celebrated. Island children even more so. If they have to go to the Continent to go to college, they have to be prepared. Everybody has to be all in.”

One Moloka‘i school has put Wise’s words to action, taking Hawaiian values typical of charter and immersion schools and applying them to a public school. Three years ago,

NATIVE HAWAIIANS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII

Nearly one in every four students in the University of Hawai‘i system is Hawaiian, based on fall 2012 enrollment numbers, the most recent data available. (The definition UH uses for a Hawaiian student is someone who answered yes to “Were any of your ancestors Hawaiian?” or who checked off “Hawaiian or Part Hawaiian” on another question.) That’s a steady growth, with 134 more Hawaiian students enrolled compared to the 2010 numbers; in fall 2010, Hawaiians made up 23.5 percent of the UH system, and in 2012, 24.2 percent.

At the four-year institutions—UH Mānoa, UH Hilo and UH West O‘ahu—enrollment is up 83 percent since fall 2005. West O‘ahu tripled Hawaiian student enrollment, going from 167 Hawaiian students

in fall 2005 to 514 in fall 2012. UH Hilo has boosted its Hawaiian student enrollment by 92 percent since fall 2005 and 2012. Faculty numbers are going up, too. A recent strategic hiring initiative at UH Mānoa sought faculty in several high-priority areas, including sustainability and Native Hawaiian knowledge and scholarship. It resulted in 11 hires of indigenous scholars, including the university’s first Hawaiian female engineer.

On the community college side of the UH system, the number of Hawaiian students attending dipped slightly, with 9,971 in fall 2012 compared to 10,121 in fall 2010. However, Hawaiians still compose almost 30 percent of the overall enrollment at community colleges.

Retention rates—coming back after the first year of college—have improved, too, though they remain lower for Hawaiian students than the overall rate.

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Moloka'i Middle School, which has a 75-percent Native Hawaiian student body, was one of the worst performing schools in the state. "Year after year, failing, and there's a culture that sets in: Children stop believing in themselves, teachers lose faith; it's all so negative," says principal Gary Davidson. When Davidson became principal two years ago, he says, "I didn't bring any magic." But he made sure the school celebrated student accomplishments with pizza, ice cream and other rewards ... That starts to build a culture of achievement. Pretty soon, the kids began to believe they could perform. That's the secret right there."

"We set a goal to be the most improved school in the state," says Davidson. "The kids got it and they started to catch fire. They knew what was at stake. If we met AYP [adequate yearly progress], we'd be out from under the restructuring process and would be a school in good standing."

The school was most improved and, indeed, made AYP, which means it has met its annual benchmark on the way to achieving the goal of proficiency. The No Child Left Behind legislation is supposed to get all of the country's public schools to 100-percent proficiency by the 2013-2014 school year.

Moloka'i Middle School has a Hawaiian immersion program and, says Davidson, is the only public school in the state with a dedicated STEM teacher (STEM is science, technology, engineering and mathematics). STEM students at the school built a hale on campus to use as an outdoor classroom. "We had Native Hawaiian masons come, picking stones with the kids, building the walls, putting the poles in, the roof on. We're taking out plants and replacing them with native vegetation. We want their children and grandchildren to walk onto this campus and say, 'My grandmother built that wall. My grandfather built that canoe garden.'"

"Our kids need a cultural and historical background to be at the global table—and the technology skills to be a vital part of that," says Davidson. "There's a lot here all ready. There's a big world out there. We need to be sure we connect those two." ▲

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