

2022 HawaiiKidsCAN Action Fund Candidate Survey

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1. What does Hawaii do well with regards to K-12 public education?

If elected, I will be active in the community with legislative solutions to ensure better social and economic outcomes for students and educators. Nationally, we've seen numerous red-state bills targeting teachers' identity and agency inside and outside classrooms. I'll be a stalwart champion against these laws ever coming to Hawai'i. To reduce the teacher shortage, I'll support the "Grow Our Own Teachers Initiative" to train students with college degrees from here and give them total stipend incentives to attend the necessary classes to become certified and licensed teachers. The HSTA and DOE have a memorandum of understanding for a recruitment and retention incentive that today provides an annual differential of \$3,000 for teachers employed in hard-to-staff locations. This is a good start. While it helped fill vacancies in the targeted areas, it hasn't significantly impacted the overall vacancies. I would support a new recruitment and retention model that looks at the shortage differential to identify schools in geographically isolated locations to address areas with higher rates of non-certified teachers and higher teacher vacancies. When I attended public schools on Kaua'i, I learned firsthand the impact good teachers can have and the loss of opportunity in their absence.

2. What should Hawaii do better with regards to K-12 public education?

We need to do more to ensure that education better serves the essential societal function of helping children live up to their highest potential as individuals and members of our society. Getting there will require us to elect leaders up and down the ballot who believe in this transformative role of education. Public education is not inadequately funded, and we are failing to live up to our obligation to the next generation. Society reaps enormous rewards when it invests adequately in education. Increased graduation rates, increased adult earnings (especially students from low-income families), decreased poverty, and reduced crime are all traced back to improved spending on education. However, these benefits take time. A long-term sustained funding increase must come before the substantial, measurable, economic, and societal benefits. Furthermore, it is crucial to have leaders continue significant investments for decades before the results are apparent. This time dynamic emphasizes the need for electing clear-sighted legislators willing to patiently maintain these increased funding levels even as other, potentially more politically expedient, priorities arise. Also, Hawai'i has one of the largest immigrant populations of any state on a per capita basis. We need to do more to offer quality public education to ESL students. With our high cost of living, we risk creating permanent underclasses when we don't have equal access to government goods and services.

3. How should Hawaii prioritize our spending on K-12 public education (for example: teacher salaries, programs to address learning loss, technology, community partnerships and projects, computer science education, charter schools, distance learning options, etc.)?

My four priorities for our public education system are: 1) Smaller student-to-teacher ratios, 2) Higher salaries for public school teachers, 3) Improving facilities, focusing on fairness for neighborhoods with fewer resources, and 4) Ensuring we are living up to our obligations to Native Hawaiian students, who are too often left behind. My door is always open to listen to Hawaii Kids Can to find the best approach to prioritize spending for public education.

4. Hawaii should require all students complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid before graduating from high school, or complete a waiver.

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Yes

5. The Hawaii State Constitution provides for the “establishment, support and control of a statewide system of public schools,” but does not guarantee quality education. Should the State Constitution be amended to provide quality education as a fundamental right? Should Hawaii students have a constitutional right to a quality education? Please explain your answer.

I am not opposed to a constitutional right to quality education and would be inclined to vote for it. As an elected State Senator, I would have many other tools to make this goal a reality. We can do more to enforce a quality education for Hawaii’s students today. We don’t have to wait for a right to quality education to be embedded in the state constitution. While I’m not a parent, we must do everything in our power to mandate that the Board of Education improve the quality of education for students by: Tracking student attainment data. Training local educators and teachers to teach modern computer science effectively to elementary and middle school students. Ensuring all students complete the FAFSA before graduating high school or complete a waiver. Embrace and pilot education innovations that can scale for wider communities to improve students’ and community outcomes.

6. What will you do to improve the relationship between the Hawaii State Board of Education and legislature?

Having attended public schools on Kaua’i, Kapa’ia Elementary School, and Elsie H. Wilcox Elementary School, I know the difference hard-working teachers can make. Senate District 11 is home to some of Hawaii’s premier public schools, and I’ll be an advocate for resources to improve experiences across the state. I want better outcomes for students and teachers. Research indicates that competitive and equitable compensation correlates with increased success in recruiting and retaining qualified educators. Yet, numerous studies have shown that Hawaii’s teacher salaries are the lowest nationally when adjusted for the state’s high cost of living. If elected, I’ll champion legislation to improve teacher salaries. If elected, I’d be very interested in improving the education of students in my district and across our state. I’d like to enhance the relationship between BOE and the legislature in several ways. It’s important to note the Hawaii State Senate provides advice and consent for appointing Board of Education members. But beyond those relationships, we need the legislature to: Fund more school improvements, Civil Beat reports in “‘We Are Never Caught Up’: Hawaii’s Aging Schools Need A Facelift,” June 2, 2022, the average age of school buildings in our state is 72 years old. Seek funding for legislative fellowships in the state capital for BOE teachers and administrators. Fund fellowship opportunities to temporarily exchange BOE administrators with education department staff in other states so we can understand best practices elsewhere and gain knowledge to improve our procedures, and vice versa. Finally, I would take the personal approach of asking BOE members to accompany me on my district’s school tours. Too often, we forget that behind titles and policies, there are real people. In addition to championing the right policies, I will also do my best to make inroads by being collaborative and accessible to both my constituents and fellow policymakers.

7. What leadership actions will you take for the Hawaii Department of Education, University of Hawaii system, and employers to work more effectively together?

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I'll be a vocal supporter of employers hiring local talent. For example, we need more housing for DOE teachers as the cost of living, specifically, housing, is too high. Suppose DOE, HSTA, and UH, UHPA worked together with a private builder. In that case, they might be able to develop workforce condos and apartments for educators to help alleviate the pressure on those individuals to work second and third jobs, move to a new job, or worse, out of state, where wages and housing are more in line for educators. Classroom educators should not feel the pressure of housing costs on their minds while teaching the state's future leaders and workers. We have exceptional staff at DOE, UH, private firms, and the rest of the government. I'd like to help them succeed together on novel problems to create successful pilot projects that could scale and help solve direct employer problems today and solve desperate statewide issues like: The teacher, nurse, and physician shortages. People with college degrees are leaving Hawaii. Wage discrepancies between Hawaii workers and peers in California. Matching students to an apprenticeship or internship-like opportunity that excites them early in high school and after graduation seeing them enter the professional world and succeed.

8. College going remains flat, with roughly 50% of recent Hawaii public high school graduates going on to college (2 or 4 year). How do you propose to raise these levels so Hawaii is more competitive with states like California, which has a nearly 65% rate?

Have we surveyed them to ask why they're not going? I'd want to read that survey. I'd like to see students succeed here in Hawaii. While I want every student to reach their potential and take advantage of open college opportunities, they must find the path of leadership that suits their goals. We can and should clarify to students how to turn a college degree into opportunities to make generous wages. I think there is an opportunity to roadmap what each year of additional education after high school in a particular field might realistically return in the public or private sector economy. We must tell the stories of college students' successes to captivate today's graduates. There has been significant counter-messaging for over a decade that college is expensive, and you should be careful not to overspend. Our state had fabulous collegiate specialties at UH Manoa and across the UH System at each of our colleges and private colleges. We must share what these programs can do for students who apply their talents and resources and chase their dreams. But we must do the roadmap work so they don't feel like they're trailblazing. Our professors' instructions and mentors will give them the confidence to learn and make impactful contributions and hopefully open up specialty paths for those who follow. Finally, we should recognize that while we must increase college attendance rates, trade schools and other career development pipelines are also valuable. Our community college system needs to play a more proactive role in collaborating with our building and trades sector to develop the next generation of well-paid and properly educated skilled workers.